

United States Department of the Interior

DRAFT

National Park Service National Register of Historic Places

Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).

1. Name of Property

historic name Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. Farmhouse
other names/site number Poillon House; Poillon-Akerly-Olmsted Farmhouse
name of related multiple property list NA

Location

street & number 4515 Hylan Boulevard
city or town Staten Island
state New York code NY county Richmond code 085 zip code 10312
not for publication vicinity

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

X national statewide x local

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official Date

Title State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register
 National Register

___ determined eligible for the

___ determined not eligible for the National Register
 Register

___ removed from the National

___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
 (Check as many boxes as apply.)

Category of Property
 (Check only **one** box.)

Number of Resources within Property
 (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

- private
- public - Local
- public - State
- public - Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
 (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
 (Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling
 AGRICULTURE/SUBSTITENCE/
 agricultural field

Current Functions
 (Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE
 RECREATION/outdoor recreation

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

COLONIAL/MID-NINETEENTH
CENTURY REVIVALS

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation Stone, brick

walls Stone, brick, wood

roof: Asphalt

other: _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. Farmhouse is located at 4515 Hylan Boulevard in the Borough of Staten Island, Richmond County, New York. During Olmsted's period of occupation, the farm was located in the town of Southfield, which was rural in nature. Located on the South Shore of Staten Island in the neighborhood of Eltingville, which lies immediately south of Great Kills and north of Annadale, the farmhouse sits on a natural bluff above Raritan Bay. Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. (1822-1903) lived in this residence between 1848 and 1855, a period of great significance in his development as a writer and a social critic.

Today, the neighborhood is marked by streets laid out in rectilinear patterns and is densely built with private residences on small lots. Although the site encompassed 130 acres at the time of Olmsted's residence, the farm began to be subdivided shortly after the Olmsted family sold the house and moved to Manhattan in the late 1850s. Beginning in the mid-1960s, this area of Staten Island experienced a construction boom in housing and commercial properties associated with post-World War II suburbanization; this transformed what had been historically open farmland into the urban sprawl that characterizes Staten Island today. As a result, the farmhouse now occupies a small parcel of 1.5 acres and is surrounded by twentieth-century single-family homes. It is completely obscured from view along Hylan Boulevard, one of the island's principal north-south thoroughfares, but has access to the boulevard via an easement. The boundary was drawn to encompass only the current parcel, which is all that survives of Olmsted's farm. No farmland representing Olmsted's agricultural use of the property survives, and none of the landscape, outbuildings, and driveways historically associated with the Olmsted period is extant. There are, however, five trees on the property that are believed by some to have been planted by Olmsted: two cedars of Lebanon, both in frail condition, are located near the house along the north side of the overgrown, non-historic driveway; a ginkgo is on the opposite side of the driveway; a black walnut and an Osage orange are located near the northeast corner of the farmhouse. Despite

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the property's lack of integrity as a farm, the building itself retains sufficient integrity from Olmsted's period of residence to illustrate his significant association with the resource.

Narrative Description

The Olmsted residence is two and one-half stories tall and of stone and wood-frame construction. The farmhouse has a very long history and there is little documented evidence of its early development; however, it reached its appearance during Olmsted's period in at least three distinct stages and has remained relatively intact since. The first owner, Petrus Tesschenmaker, who acquired a land grant in 1695, erected a small stone building on the property. The foundation of this 16 by 16 foot square building is believed to form the northern half of the basement. Subsequently, the land was owned by the Poillon family, early settlers of Huguenot origin, from ca. 1696 until 1802.¹ In the early eighteenth century, Jacques Poillon apparently enlarged the original stone structure by 30 feet and built a one and one-half story stone farmhouse above it with a porch along the east elevation.² Between 1802 and 1839, it had a series of owners, and in 1839 it was purchased by Dr. Samuel Akerly. At that time, its appearance seemed to match that of other surviving eighteenth-century stone houses on Staten Island. It was described in the period as 46 feet long, 20 feet wide and one and one-half stories tall with a roof that extended to shelter a narrow porch along the east elevation.

Shortly after his 1839 purchase, Dr. Akerly, altering the house as a retirement home suitable for his large family, added the upper story and a half (of frame and brick construction), a verandah around three elevations, six-over-six wood window sash, frieze windows, and (probably) a small wood-frame kitchen wing; he also created a center hall plan and added Greek Revival style moldings and trim throughout. This describes the house when Olmsted first occupied it in 1848. Based on current documentation, it is believed that Olmsted made few, if any, changes to the house. There were several other, mostly minor, changes to adapt the residence for hotel use in the early twentieth century. Although neglected and somewhat deteriorated, the residence substantially retains its historic character to Olmsted's period of residence and would be recognizable to him today.

In its current condition, the farmhouse, which faces east, consists of a main block and a smaller kitchen wing on the north elevation. The main block is 50 by 24 feet in size and two and one-half stories tall. It is five bays wide with a center entrance on the first story (façade) and two bays deep. The second story is four bays wide. The foundation, crawl space, and lower story are constructed of local fieldstone and the first story has been coated with lime plaster. The second story, which is four bays wide, is primarily constructed of wood with wide clapboard siding. The north second-story end wall is brick. The building is built into the hillside so that the basement is exposed to a greater degree on the south elevation. The residence is surmounted by a gable roof; however, the south end is hipped. The roof is now covered in asphalt shingles. There are chimneys at either end of the building; the south one is interior and the north one is exterior and partially engaged. Fenestration is fairly symmetrical. Windows are evenly spaced and most contain six-over-six double-hung wood sash within

¹Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 57.

²WAPARO, Inc., *EIS Background Document Preliminary Cultural Resources Assessment: Literature Search and Windshield Survey* (February 1978), II-32-33. c.f. Barbaralee Diamondstein-Spielvogel, *Landmarks of New York: An Illustrated Record of the Historic Buildings of N.Y.C.*, 6th ed. New York: Historic Preservation Center, 2016., 76.

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flat wood frames with slightly projecting lintels. Windows on the brick end wall have wide wooden lintels. Frieze windows in the half-story are three-pane-wide wood-frame awning windows.

Although the three-sided verandah, located on the house's west, south, and east elevations, is missing, its brick supporting piers remain in place. The absence of the porch also reveals the fieldstone basement, which has brick arched window openings and brick infill. The stone basement walls are missing most of the exterior stucco found elsewhere on the house.

The façade (east elevation) features a center entrance flanked by two window openings on each side. The first-floor windows and doors were carefully sealed with plywood from both sides in 2010 and are believed to be intact behind the plywood. Historic photos show a single door flanked by full-length shutters. In addition to the nineteenth-century openings on the façade, three brick round arches provide evidence of earlier first floor façade openings. One arch is directly above the center entrance and the other two span the spaces between the windows. These are believed to show the locations of an earlier entrance and flanking windows, perhaps relating to the eighteenth-century one and one-half story stone house before it was reconfigured into five bays.

The second floor features four equally spaced windows and the third floor has three-pane frieze windows in line with the windows on the second floor. There is evidence of the historic verandah's roof on the façade. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century photos that post-date Olmsted's residence show the porch supported on what appear to be round posts on square plinths with delicate scroll-sawn brackets at the roofline. There is no evidence of the porch's appearance in Akerly or Olmsted's day, except a sketch that Olmsted made showing square, Greek Revival style piers supporting the porch. These would have been consistent with the rest of the ca. 1839 embellishment; however, there is no evidence that the sketch was an accurate rendering of existing conditions. It could also have been a plan for future improvements.

The west elevation has a narrow, single, center door (boarded up from both sides) on the lower level; however, it is flanked by only one window (again, carefully boarded up with plywood from both sides) on the far north end of the first-floor fieldstone wall. The second and third floors of the west elevation are nearly identical to the façade. The south gable end is composed of the exposed two-bay fieldstone basement with two brick arched windows (boarded) and the fieldstone first story with windows (boarded) aligned with those in the basement and the living room. The chimney is interior on this elevation. The second story and attic are wood frame with clapboard siding. The upper stories of the two-bay north gable end are of brick construction with an engaged brick chimney flanked by windows with wide wood lintels arranged symmetrically.

There is a one-story, two-bay by two-bay kitchen wing, approximately 20 by 18 feet, appended to the north gable end of the main block. The foundation of the kitchen ell is constructed of fieldstone and brick. The kitchen is also clad with wood clapboards and features a gable roof and a red brick chimney located in the center of the north gable wall; there are two small, square four-pane windows in the attic level of the north gable wall. The exterior door and window on the east elevation have been protected with plywood. There are no openings in the west elevation. As with the main house, historic window and door shutters have been removed and are currently in storage.

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Interior

The interior of the farmhouse is generally consistent in form and detail to the ca. 1839 period. The main block of the farmhouse has a center-hall plan with access from the center entrance of the facade and a corresponding door on the rear (west) elevation. The center hall (12 feet x 16 feet) runs east/west through the house and is flanked by the dining room (16 feet square) on the north side and the living room (16 feet square) on the south side. The original partition wall that separated the hall from the living room has been removed so that the hall and living room are now one space. However, the original spatial divisions can still be discerned by lines in the floor and ceiling. The stairway, which appears to date to the ca. 1839 renovations, is simple, especially the delicate handrail and newel post. The stair takes a straight path to the second floor, where it ends, surrounded by a rail on three sides.

The living room, south of the hall, has a fireplace on the south wall of the room with a non-historic (twentieth-century) brick firebox; it is surrounded by ca. 1960 imitation wood paneling. The window trim, paneling, and baseboards appear to date from the ca. 1839 renovation. Floors are wide-board wood. The dining room, north of the hall, is covered in red wallpaper, ca. 1960. There is a fireplace with historic candle cabinets located on the north wall; the mantel appears to date to the ca. 1839 period, as do the six-panel interior doors and the baseboards. The floor is also wide-board wood. The kitchen is accessed through an open doorway to the immediate right of the fireplace.

The small, one-and-one-half story kitchen is a single room, with walls and ceiling covered with ca. 1960 beaded board. There is an exposed brick chimney on the north kitchen wall that appears to be a mid-twentieth century addition (photographs from 1931 show an exterior door where the current chimney stands). The flooring material appears to be linoleum. There is also an exterior door on the east elevation.

The second floor is divided by a transverse hallway running north/south. There are four bedrooms and one bathroom on this level. The bedrooms at the north and south end of the house span the entire end of the building, each having exposures on three sides and identical wood mantels on their end walls. Most second-floor molding and trim appears to date to the ca. 1839 period. All bedrooms contain built-in cupboards (ca. 1839) and full-size six-over-six double-hung windows. All of the six-over-six sash are believed to be replacements dating to the 1920s.

The half-story is accessed by an enclosed stairway located through a doorway to the north side of the central stair on the second floor and contains four bedrooms and one bathroom arranged in a similar fashion to the second floor. In the attic story, the side elevations are lit by frieze windows and the north and south end elevations are lit by full sized, six-over-six double-hung windows. The basement, accessed by a door beneath the central stair and a wood stairway, is unfinished with a brick floor set directly on the dirt.

While the house is somewhat deteriorated, it appears to be structurally intact. The most significant alteration since Olmsted's period of residence is the loss of the encircling porch, which has featured in some form in every historic description of the house, in Olmsted's period sketch, and in every historic photo. While a large porch is a significant, character-defining feature of a mid-nineteenth century country house, the residence retains numerous other features from the 1840s-1850s, as well as some materials and forms from a considerably earlier time. These include stone, wood, and brick materials, evidence of eighteenth-century form and fenestration on

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the first story, mid-nineteenth century size and massing, five-bay, center-hall form, division into spaces, symmetrical fenestration, interior cabinets, moldings and some finishes, several mantels, kitchen addition, and stair. Thus, the house retains design integrity, integrity of plan from Olmsted's period, and, for the most part, integrity of materials from both of its major development periods. And while the intensive development of Staten Island in the twentieth century has destroyed its integrity of setting, the farmhouse retains integrity of location, feeling, and a strong association with its most significant inhabitant. It is the most important and sole surviving building associated with this significant period in Olmsted's life; it is substantially intact to the Olmsted period, and it would be clearly recognizable to him and his family.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

within the past 50 years.

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL HISTORY

ARCHITECTURE

LITERATURE

Period of Significance

1848-1855 Olmsted period - B

ca. 1720-1855 Architecture period - C

Significant Dates

1848

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. (1822-1903)

Cultural Affiliation

n/a

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance for criterion B is 1848-1855, the years during which Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. occupied the property. The building is also significant in architecture under criterion C in the period ca. 1720-ca 1855 as a mid-nineteenth century farmhouse on Staten Island that incorporates an eighteenth-century settlement period core. The two and one-half story stone and frame building illustrates a typical pattern of evolution characteristic of small vernacular settlement period forms that were enlarged and reconfigured to meet later needs in this region. The building retains a remarkable and recognizable collection of forms and materials from each period.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

n/a

Summary

The Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. Farmhouse is nationally significant under criterion B in the areas of social history and literature for its association with a formative period in the life and career of one of America's most important social critics and landscape architects. Olmsted (1822-1903) moved to this residence (then part of a 130-acre farm) in 1848 and resided in it until 1855. In this period, he experimented with scientific farming on the property, ran a nursery, helped to start and promote an agricultural improvement society on Staten Island, and read widely and extensively. He also met and engaged with numerous intellectually stimulating and influential people (including Andrew Jackson Downing), made professional associations (with people such as William Henry Vanderbilt and George Palmer Putnam), traveled throughout England and parts of Europe (experiencing the English pastoral landscape and English public parks for the first time), and traveled throughout the southern United States (learning about poverty, slavery, and social injustice). He wrote numerous articles about the English landscape and the American South, most of which were published in the *New York (Daily) Times*, and completed three influential and important books (*Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* and *A Journey Through Texas*), in which he further elaborated and explained his expanding views on these topics. During his residency, Olmsted also received numerous visitors and engaged in lively and "stirring discussions" on the subject of slavery with leading

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thinkers and intellectuals such as William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Parker, Charles Loring Brace, Frederick Kingsbury, and his brother, John Hull Olmsted. It is through his varied and wide-ranging observations, traveling, reading, and writing in this period that Olmsted honed his personal theories about democracy and explored ideas about the restorative properties of nature and the value of public parks. During this period of experience and contemplation, unencumbered by duty and made possible by financial and practical support from his father and his brother, Olmsted began to develop a mature social conscience, formulate ideas linking nature to public welfare, recognize the obligation of government to provide public parkland, especially in urban areas, and become an influential social thinker and critic, disseminating his ideas widely. He also became a strong advocate against slavery. He arrived in Staten Island with the still unproven goal of becoming a scientific farmer; and, although he retained an interest in the subject, the activity itself did not sustain him, and he emerged from that period as a respected writer and social theorist. During this period, his growing ambition to be useful in society expanded from the scale of creating one socially progressive farm to one that led him to develop theories and create parks and park systems that served large segments of society. It was in this period that Olmsted fully embraced the social aims of landscape design – that beyond providing pleasing scenic effects, public landscapes were essential in promoting the health, welfare, and the comfort of citizens. By the time he moved to Manhattan in 1855, Olmsted was on the verge of an important career writing about and influencing public policy and manipulating vast tracts land for the public benefit. This short, though seminal period of his life set the course of his lifework and his significant contributions to American society. Although the 130-acre farm no longer survives, the house itself retains sufficient integrity from Olmsted’s period of residence to illustrate his years of occupation. It is the only resource that represents this important period of Olmsted’s life.

The farmhouse is also locally significant under criterion C in the area of architecture in the period ca. 1720-1855 as a rare surviving example of a two and one-half story mid-nineteenth century farmhouse on Staten Island that also retains elements of its earlier late-eighteenth century core structure. The building’s basement and long lower stone story incorporates portions of earlier dwellings on the site and is recognizable as a typical late-eighteenth century northern European stone settlement-period house type. The house as it existed by Olmsted’s period, with its upper story and one-half frame addition, five-bay, center-hall symmetrical form, encircling verandah, and Greek Revival period embellishment, was a typical example of a mid-nineteenth century farmhouse on Staten Island, a number of which incorporated earlier buildings. On the interior, elements of the materials, plan and finishes from the second period (c1839-1855) predominate. Due to Staten Island’s intensive suburban development in the mid-twentieth century, this farmhouse constitutes a rare surviving example of a vernacular farmhouse in the county. Despite the loss of its nineteenth-century verandah and some deterioration, the building illustrates both of its significant architectural types.

Early History of the Site

A review of archival records shows that the first owner of the property was Petrus Tesschenmaker, the minister (or “Domine”) of the Dutch Reformed Church, who acquired a land grant on November 3, 1685 from Thomas Dongan, the 2d Earl of Limerick and first royal governor of New York. Tesschenmaker erected a small stone building on the property, the foundation of which now forms the northern half of the current basement. The

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interior measured 16 feet square and contained a “secret pocket within the stone wall about 9 by 9 inches by 4 feet in which the Domine stored his church records.”³

In 1696, Jacques Poillon, a Huguenot and a local road commissioner under Governor Henry Sloughter, purchased the property. Around 1720, he enlarged Tesschenmaker’s stone structure, extending the original home by approximately 30 feet, and built a one and one-half story stone house, 46 feet long and 20 feet wide with a porch on the east elevation. The property was used by the Poillon family as a farm, which included 160 acres of orchards.⁴ Three generations of the Poillon family resided here, including John Poillon (1723-1802), who was a member of the Committee of Safety for Richmond County. John Poillon was also associated with the peace conference held at the nearby Billopp House (Conference House, NR listed) on September 11, 1776, during which Continental Congress representatives John Adams, Edward Rutledge, and Benjamin Franklin met with representatives of King George III, including Lord Richard Howe, to negotiate terms to end hostilities between the American Colonies and the Crown; no reconciliation was reached and war continued until 1781.⁵ The Poillon family owned the house until 1802, after which it had several owners until 1839, when it was purchased by Samuel Akerly. In 1891, Olmsted himself recalled how the house had been described in this era:

Upon this farm, there had been, until within a few years of my time, a house described to me as “a real old Dutch farm-house”; long and low, of one story fully above ground covered with a peaked and curved roof. Its main floor was on the level of the ground at one end and, as the surface sloped away, seven feet above it at the other [south], where a level entrance was given to the cellar. [Dr. Akerly] had removed the roof, and built a verandah on three sides of the house. The old walls, having been formed principally of large boulders collected on the farm, were very thick and the openings for windows in them, short and narrow.⁶

Samuel Akerly, M.D., Oakland Farm

The owner who preceded Olmsted was Dr. Samuel Akerly (1785-1845), a founder of the New York Institute for the Blind, who purchased the farm, then located in the area of Staten Island known as Southfield, from the estate of Judge John Garretson on May 1, 1839. Akerly intended to use the farm as his retirement home and named it “Oakland.” Akerly enlarged the house to accommodate his large family, adding a full story and a half wood-frame addition with a gable and hipped roof above the stone story and a one-story wood frame kitchen ell at the north end of the stone house. Akerly also added a veranda around three elevations.⁷

³ WAPARO, Inc., *EIS Background Document Preliminary Cultural Resources Assessment: Literature Search and Windshield Survey* (February 1978), II-32-33., Barbaralee Diamondstein-Spielvogel, *Landmarks of New York: An Illustrated Record of the Historic Buildings of N.Y.C.*, 6th ed. New York: Historic Preservation Center, 2016, 76. See also “Parks Acquires Former Home of Central Park Designer,” *The Daily Plant* 21, no. 4491 (September 28, 2006). <https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/daily-plant?id=19949>

⁴ WAPARO, Inc., *EIS Background Document Preliminary Cultural Resources Assessment: Literature Search and Windshield Survey* (February 1978), II-32-33. c.f. Barbaralee Diamondstein-Spielvogel, *Landmarks of New York: An Illustrated Record of the Historic Buildings of N.Y.C.*, 6th ed. New York: Historic Preservation Center, 2016, 76.

⁵ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, “Poillon House Designation Report,” February 28, 1967.

⁶ Frederick Law Olmsted to William James, 8 July 1891, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 9 (1890-1895), David Schuyler and Gregory Kaliss, eds (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 361.

⁷ Akerly’s alterations are documented by numerous sources. This reference is cited in Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 57.

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In his retirement years, Dr. Akerly became known in the region as a naturalist and an expert on agriculture. In 1905, Dr. Arthur Hollick, a co-founder of the Natural Science Association of Staten Island (today the Staten Island Museum), presented a paper in which he noted that Akerly was “interested in agriculture not only its economic side but from the point of view of the scientific observer.”⁸ Citing an 1842 article authored by Akerly entitled “Agriculture of Richmond County,” Dr. Hollick recalled that Staten Island (in the decade prior to Olmsted’s residency) had a population of 11,000, of which 8,841 were farmers who cultivated such diverse crops as “bread corn [wheat or rye], barley, oats, potatoes, and hay, a much larger quantity is produced than the consumption of the county requires, and the surplus is sold in the City of New York.”⁹ Dr. Akerly was a renowned agricultural reformer and a frequent contributor to the *Cultivator*, a monthly journal in which he was known “by his various contributions under the signatures of ‘Richmond’ and ‘a Practical Farmer.’”¹⁰

After Dr. Akerly’s death in 1845, his farm on Staten Island was listed for sale, notice of which appeared in the June 1846 issue of the *Cultivator*. The advertisement provides a description of the property that was soon to come into Olmsted’s possession:

The well-known farm of the late Samuel Akerly, M.D., situated on the South side of Staten Island, in the town of Southfield, Richmond county, in consequence of the decease of its owner, is now for sale. It contains 125 acres, 25 of which are woodland; is in a high state of cultivation, and well stocked with a variety of fruit trees.¹¹ The house has been recently enlarged—is ample and commodious; the barns are new, and the farm is in good fence. It has a wide front to the water on a bay which abounds with the best kind of salt water fish, also with clams and oysters, all easily procured fresh from their native element. The experience of a long course of years, for the main part of the dwelling house has stood for more than a century, has demonstrated that the situation is perfectly healthful.

The late owner, Dr. Akerly, died in July last; he had cultivated the farm for a number of years with great assiduity and care, keeping a daily and most minute register of the precise amount of labor and cultivation bestowed on each field, and noting many important observations which would be highly instructive and useful to the future owner. The purchaser may be furnished with a copy of this diary.

The site of this farm is extremely beautiful—the approach to it from the main road is a private road of about half a mile in length, running mostly through a piece of woodland, consisting of young timber of vigorous growth. After the visitor has traveled on this road about one-third of a mile, there opens upon him a prospect which takes in the low land, comprising the cultivated part of the farm—the placid and bright bay which separates Staten Island from Monmouth county, N.J.,—the highlands of Neversink, with the two lighthouses erected thereon—the lighthouses on

⁸ Arthur Hollick, ed., “Staten Island’s First Resident Naturalist,” *Proceedings of the Natural Science Association of Staten Island* 9, no.14 (April 15, 1905), 43. c.f. e.g. Samuel Akerly, “Supplement to the Agriculture of Richmond County,” *Transactions of the New-York State Agricultural Society, Together with an Abstract of the Proceedings of the County Agricultural Societies* vol. 3 (Albany: Carroll and Cook, 1844).

⁹ Hollick, “Staten Island’s First Resident Naturalist,” 44.

¹⁰ *Cultivator*, 195.

¹¹ While advertised as 125 acres, the property deed recorded January 31, 1848 reads, “. . .that certain farm with the improvements thereon situate on the South side of Staten Island in the town of Southfield, County of Richmond and State of New York. . .containing one hundred and thirty Acres of land, or thereabouts.” (Liber 16, page 404).

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and near Sandy Hook, together with the one at Prince's Bay, including the west end of Long Island. All the vessels employed in the commerce of New-York with foreign countries may be seen as they come in and depart, from the dwelling house and several other points on the farm.

The late owner, Dr. Akerly, who was born and educated in this city, after extensive examination and inquiry for a farm to which he might retire, on account of his impaired health, selected this spot, to which he removed in the year 1839. Here he sought health and quiet retirement and found them, until the day before his decease. He became exceedingly attached to the farm as a residence, and would have most reluctantly exchanged it for any other residence whatever. Such were its attractions that he never left it a single day, in winter or summer, but with regret.¹²

The farmhouse at the end of the Akerly era reflects an important transition beginning to take place on Staten Island during the 1830s, as urban families began to purchase property there, either for full-time suburban living outside of Manhattan or for summer residence. While some of these buyers built new houses, gradually developing neighborhoods of large picturesque Victorian villas, others purchased existing building stock, transforming the island's old stone farmhouses, as Dr. Akerly did, with additions and stylistic updates that produced unusual combinations of old and new.¹³ Today, most of Staten's surviving settlement-period farmhouses have a second layer reflecting this nineteenth-century transition, and most clearly illustrate both eras.¹⁴ The Akerly farmhouse, which was not significantly altered in the Olmsted years, is a rare surviving example of this resource type.

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. – Early Life

While Frederick Law Olmsted may be remembered as the Father of American Landscape Architecture, he did not start out with the intention of becoming a landscape architect; rather, his influential and brilliant career was the culmination and the synthesis of the many varied experiences and occupations that preceded it. Olmsted was born on April 26, 1822, in Hartford, Connecticut, to John and Charlotte Hull Olmsted. John, who was a prosperous dry goods merchant, and Charlotte, a farmer's daughter, had another son, John Hull Olmsted, three years later. Olmsted's mother died when Frederick was three from an accidental overdose of laudanum while suffering a toothache. Fourteen months later, John Olmsted married a close friend of Charlotte's, Mary Ann Bull, the daughter of a druggist; they were married for forty-seven years until John's death in 1873. John and Mary Ann Olmsted had six children (several of whom died young), but Olmsted also had many aunts, uncles and cousins and grew up among this large and close family.

The loss of his mother at such a young age was a pivotal event in Frederick's early life. He referred to it himself, and some have speculated that the young Olmsted developed posttraumatic stress disorder after witnessing his mother's untimely death. Olmsted later recalled: "When I was three years old I chanced to stray into a room at the crisis of a tragedy therein occurring, and I turned and fled from it screaming...It was long

¹² *Cultivator* 3, no. 1 (January 1846): 200.

¹³ Andrew Dolkart, *Alice Austen House National Register Nomination, Additional Documentation*, 2017.

¹⁴ The Alice Austen House is a good example of this with its combination of seventeenth-century farmhouse and nineteenth-century Gothic Revival overlay.

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before I could be soothed and those nearby said to one another that I would never forget what I had seen.”¹⁵ This was the first of several traumatic events in his youth that affected him. To deal with these traumas (including his father’s remarriage, the death of his half-sister from measles, and witnessing a teacher accidentally burn to death after her clothes had caught fire) Olmsted sought solace by being alone outside in nature. He once recounted:

[m]y mother died while I was so young that I have but a tradition of memory rather than the faintest recollection of her. While I was a small boy, if I was asked if I remember her, I could say ‘Yes; I remember playing in the grass and looking up at her while she sat sewing under a tree...’ It has always been a delight to me to see a woman sitting under a tree, sewing and minding a child.¹⁶

Whether it was because he had an innate sense of solace in nature or whether it was sparked by his family’s own deep appreciation for the outdoors, Olmsted was deeply connected with the natural world from early childhood. Olmsted himself described both his father and his stepmother as very sensitive to beauty, and they were known to travel widely, enjoying scenic drives in Connecticut and longer vacations and holidays in scenic places. Olmsted recalled that “the happiest recollections of my early life are the walks and rides I had with my father and the drives with my father and [step-]mother in the woods and fields. Sometimes these were quite extended, and really tours in search of the picturesque.”¹⁷

Perhaps because of his family’s own comfort in the natural world, Olmsted was allowed to spend a great deal of his early life wandering freely outdoors.¹⁸ He described himself as a drifter, a dreamer, and a keen observer of nature, and, in a fraction of an autobiography, he later recalled:

I can see that my pleasure began to be affected by conditions of scenery at an early age; long before it could have been suspected by others from any thing that I said and before I began to mentally connect the cause and effect of enjoyment in it. It occurred too, while I was but a half grown lad that my parents thought well to let me wander as few parents are willing their children should.”¹⁹

His schooling was rather erratic and undisciplined, as he attended several village schools before being tutored by a long series of ministers. He was not specifically encouraged to go to college, and it has been speculated that he lacked the discipline; but a bout of poison sumac that affected his eyesight in his teen years was blamed for his failure to matriculate at Yale. He, nevertheless, thirsted for knowledge and was largely self-educated, reading determinedly and observing indiscriminately, auditing a semester at Yale when his brother was a

¹⁵ In Michael Sperber, M.D., “Frederick Law Olmsted: Brief Life of the First Landscape Psychoarchitect, 1822-1903,” *Harvard Magazine* (July-August 2007).

¹⁶ Sperber, “Frederick Law Olmsted,” *Harvard Magazine*, 2007.

¹⁷ Frederick Law Olmsted, “Autobiographical Fragments,” in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), 46.

<file:///Users/kathleenlafank/Desktop/fredericklawolms00olms.pdf>

¹⁸ Roper, *FLO*, 5-6.

¹⁹ Frederick Law Olmsted, “Autobiographical Fragment B” [c1870s], *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, ed. Charles Capen McLaughlin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 115.

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student there and seeking out productive conversations with experts in the fields he wished to learn about. At eighteen, with formal schooling over, he was both unprepared and at a loss for a career, spending some time studying civil engineering, a year as a clerk in a New York City business, and another as an apprentice sailor on a voyage to China. Finally, after working on the New Haven farm of his uncle, David Brooks, during harvest season in 1844, Olmsted settled on the notion of becoming a “scientific farmer,” perhaps because it aligned both with his love of the outdoors and his increasing desire to be useful to society, something that may have been embedded in his New England roots and Puritan ideology.²⁰ Olmsted had begun to look upon farming as a respectable profession, one that required skill and scientific knowledge (but not a formal education) and had the peaceful goal of providing food to his fellow human beings.²¹

Rural pursuits...tend to elevate and enlarge the ideas, for all the proudest aims of Science are involved in them. They require a constant application of the principles and objects of the Chemist, Naturalist, Geologists, Mechanic, &c. More than all of them, it cultivates, or should, the taste & sentiment...But the objects of a farmer are such as benefit others, and will not subject his motives to harsh investigation. For my part, I believe that our farmers are, and have cause to be, the most contented men in the world.²²

In serious pursuit of this goal, in 1846 he traveled to Albany, where, after meeting Andrew Jackson Downing, who took an interest in him, he received a recommendation from Luther Tucker, editor of the *Cultivator*, and set off for central New York to apprentice with George Geddes in Camillus, near Syracuse. Geddes, president of the New York State Agricultural Society, was the owner of a three-hundred-acre farm known as “Fairmount,” which had been awarded first prize by the New York Agricultural Society as an exemplar of a scientific farm.²³ Over the summer and fall of 1846, Olmsted learned the basics of farming, cultivating, planting, hoeing, sheep shearing, and other farm practices from Geddes.²⁴

This period also afforded him time for reading and contemplation. In the summer before he left for Camillus, he wrote to friend Frederick Kingsbury that he was reading Richard Whately’s *Elements of Logic*, James Mills’s *History of British India*, the *Federalist Papers*, poetry, fiction, and ecclesiastical literature.²⁵ That summer, he also tackled the works of Thomas Carlyle. Meanwhile, he also continued to reflect on his place in society: “I want to make myself useful in the world...to help to advance the condition of Society and hasten the preparation for the MillenniumNow, how shall I prepare myself to exercise the greatest and best influence in the situation of life I am likely to be placed in?”²⁶ Olmsted highly respected Geddes and eagerly studied his ideas about scientific farming, which greatly appealed to him in his quest to “advance the condition of Society.” The

²⁰ Charles Beveridge, Introduction to *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. II, 1852-1857, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 6-7.

²¹ Roper, *FLO*, 37.

²² Frederick Law Olmsted to John Hull Olmsted, 23 June 1845, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 219-220.

²³ Unfortunately, the Geddes Farm does not survive, but its location is identified by a detailed marker.

²⁴ Roper, *FLO*, 44-45.

²⁵ Frederick Law Olmsted to Frederick Kingsbury, 14 July, 1846, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 7.

²⁶ Frederick Law Olmsted to Frederick Kingsbury, 12 June 1846, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 243.

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scientific farmer was in a position to instruct others in how to improve their crops, their farms, and their lives as the basis for an improved society. Geddes also proved a model for Olmsted in terms of what it meant to be responsible for the common good. Geddes was a leader in his local church, helped to build what became the first plank road in the United States, and traveled to various local architectural fairs and societies.²⁷ Under his tutelage, Olmsted accompanied him on some of his travels and took on some of the same responsibilities, teaching Sunday school classes, starting a library for one of the classes, and writing an article for an agricultural society about farm tools. He wrote to Charles Loring Brace that the summer had sparked an increase in his study and reading.²⁸

Scientific farming, which was becoming popular in the United States, was pioneered in Great Britain and owed its growing influence abroad to publications like the *Cultivator*. “[S]cientific farmers were concerned with the practical and utilitarian, but they were also interested in aesthetics. They believed that their experiments and writing on the subject would work to elevate the American farmer (and therefore a significant percentage of the American populace) physically, mentally, and morally.”²⁹ Those who promoted the idea also wrote extensively on the practice and the benefits of scientific farming. One such 800-page guide, *Country Life*, written by Robert Morris Copeland, was dedicated, in part, “[t]o all lovers of nature and to all engaged in cultivating and adorning the earth . . .”³⁰ Yet, scientific farming was more than a romantic pursuit, it drew heavily on the idea of using science (and, in particular, chemistry) to produce a higher, and more sustainable yield of crops.³¹

At the end of the apprenticeship, Geddes encouraged Olmsted to establish a farm of his own nearby. But despite the appeal of the central New York countryside, Olmsted wished to return to Connecticut. He had been considering a farm for sale at Sachem’s Head, Guilford, about ten miles from New Haven. Although he raised doubts about the place in a March 1847 letter to his father, John Olmsted nevertheless gave him the money to purchase the property.³² By February 1847, Olmsted had moved to Guilford, but the farm at Sachem’s Head was a disappointment. The property was small and the house old and forlorn. It was also rather isolated from the lively society of books and ideas that the young farmer had come to depend on. Nevertheless, Olmsted remained generally optimistic for its success. In a March 23, 1847 letter to his father, Olmsted wrote, “[t]he farm has been miserably cultivated by the old miserly tyrant that has gone to his account, but there is by nature excellent land and every convenience and beauty desirable.”³³ He wrote to his brother that “[t]he farm

²⁷ Geddes’s 16-mile plank road, which extended from Salina to the village of Central Square, in Onondaga County, was the first plank road built in the United States. Planks were chosen for the plentitude of the material and its durability. The cost of \$23,000 was born by investors and raised by the sale of stock. The planks were removed gradually beginning in 1873 and the road was paved in 1919; it is part of state highway 174 today.

²⁸ Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 66; Frederick Law Olmsted to Charles Loring Brace, 30 July 1846, in Rybczynski, 66.

²⁹ Daniel Joseph Nadenicek, “Early Visions for a System of Connected Parks,” *Marrying Beauty with Utility* (Boone, NC: Appalachian State University, 1993), 103.

³⁰ Nadenicek, “Early Visions for a System of Connected Parks,” 103.

³¹ Eugene Davenport, “Scientific Farming,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 40 (March 1912), 45-50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1012794>

³² Frederick Law Olmsted to John Olmsted, 23 July 1846, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 259.

³³ Frederick Law Olmsted to John Olmsted, 23 March 1847, *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1922), 84.

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generally pleases me well. There is a good deal more beautiful and valuable wood on it than I had supposed. But then—again—there’s more rocks, and there are not so many apple-trees, and the barn and house are in worse condition than I had thought them to be.”³⁴ Even with these challenges, Olmsted thought that he could turn the farm into a profitable enterprise. He devised a new landscape plan for the farm, which he recorded in a letter to his brother, noting that the lawn was to be the grand gesture: “The ground is naturally graded and finely adapted for a broad, smooth green plat broken only by a few trees or clumps.”³⁵

Still, none of the Olmsteds was especially pleased with the farm or confident of its possibilities for success. It also proved to require more effort and resources than the young farmer was expecting, and his brother later noted that “[t]here had been some vague doubt whether Fred could ever make out to live off the Sachem’s Head farm, suggested perhaps by the fact that some \$1000 had been expended on it to enable the total crops to be worth \$200.”³⁶ Less than a year after his arrival, at the end of 1847, the family decided to consider a much larger, better located, and better suited property on Staten Island. In December 1847, Olmsted and his brother went to inspect it, and by New Years the purchase had been made, once again by the senior Olmsted, who paid \$13,000 for the 130-acre farm. Returning to Connecticut, Olmsted signed over the deed to the Sachem’s Head farm to his father “for the consideration of \$4,000” and used the funds to help purchase the Akerly farm.

Olmsted on Staten Island – 1848-1855

The former Akerly farm was considerably larger than the Guilford property and appeared better suited to make a profit. By March 1848, Frederick Law Olmsted had moved to Staten Island. In a remembrance written in 1920, a year before her own death, Mary Perkins Olmsted (by then the widow of Frederick Law Olmsted) provided her recollections of Staten Island in this period (when she lived there with her grandfather, Cyrus Perkins, and was Olmsted’s neighbor) as well as a description of the Akerly farm from Olmsted’s earliest occupation:

The farm stretched from the Main Road [Amboy Road] to the shore of Prince's Bay about a mile in length.

Leaving the main road one entered a very pretty wood of trees of fair size,—oaks, maples, sweet and sour gum, sassafras, holly, etc. After about a quarter of a mile one came out upon the cleared land on the top of a small rise. The soil was heavy red clay, very suitable for wheat, etc., yielding up to 40 bushels per acre. There was a sort of plateau from which the land sloped gently down for about quarter of a mile and then an almost level stretch went to the bank six feet above the beach. From all this part of the farm there was a fine view of Prince's Bay looking across to Sandy Hook (slightly foreshortened), Navesink, and the New Jersey Hills stretching away to the southward. There were no trees on this level with the exception of one tall old pear

³⁴ Frederick Law Olmsted to John Hull Olmsted, 16 February 1847, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 286.

³⁵ Frederick Law Olmsted to John Hull Olmsted, 23 March 1847, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 293.

³⁶ John Hull Olmsted to Frederick Kingsbury, March 1848, in Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing*, 75.

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tree at the foot of which were found from time to time the bones of the slaves who had been buried there. . . .³⁷

The farm commanded a view of all shipping outward or inward bound. . . .

The house, standing at the foot of the slope, was built of rough stone plastered over with lime, and had been, until shortly before Dr. Akerly's death, only a story and a half high. He had, in order to accommodate his growing family of grand-children built on in wood a full story and a half, giving nine bed chambers. Outside the junction of the stone and wood was disguised by the roof of an all round piazza. Inside the effect was rather odd for the stone wall a foot and a half thick came up nearly three feet and on top of it were built closets convenient, but queer. Downstairs was an entrance hall of 12 x 16 feet going through from east to west and on each side a 16 ft. square room with tolerably high ceiling, windows with deep seats looking east and in one room a window looking south either side of the fireplace.

On the south end, the ground sloped so that there was an easy entrance for barrows to the cellar, large and well lighted, and used as a dairy. There was a small outbuilding north of the house where was found a breast plate engraved 'The King's American Dragoon's,' laid away on a beam in what had evidently been a stable.³⁸

At 26 years old, Olmsted settled into life at the farm, which he named Tosomock Farm. He was joined by his aunt, Maria Olmsted, who served as his housekeeper and oversaw, according to the same reminiscence by Mary Perkins Olmsted, two Irish maids and a boy. Additionally, Olmsted hired six regular field hands with one or two extra hands hired at harvest time. Olmsted's father reminded him that the farm would require his "close and undivided personal attention" and noted his expectation that "no extraneous or unimportant matter . . . will take up your mind and time."³⁹ Olmsted seemed to comply with this advice, at least for his first two years, when he rarely left the farm.⁴⁰

Olmsted had plans for improving the site. His informal drawing of the house survives, along with a diagram of the "Staten Island Farm" showing the location of the house, outbuildings, and major landscape features.⁴¹

Frederick Kingsbury recalled the original site:

The barns were quite near, and in the rear of the house was a small pond fifteen or twenty feet in diameter, used for washing wagons, water stock, and as a swimming place for dogs, ducks and geese. There was no turf near it. The whole place was

³⁷ Although the original farm went to the water's edge, the site that Mary Perkins Olmsted describes here is now outside the boundary of the nomination, as intervening development has destroyed the integrity of the farm. However, in general, the beach front land itself remains undeveloped, and the New York SHPO believes that the site she refers to, as well as similar sites up and down the coast, remain undisturbed.

³⁸ Mary Perkins Olmsted [1920], in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 78-79. <file:///Users/kathleenlafank/Desktop/fredericklawolms00olms.pdf>

³⁹ John Olmsted to Frederick Law Olmsted and John Hull Olmsted, 29 January 1849, in Roper, *FLO*, 56.

⁴⁰ Frederick J. Kingsbury [1903], in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 85-86.

⁴¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Frederick Law Olmsted Papers: Miscellany -1952; Drawings, sketches, and maps. - 1952, 1837.* Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss35121.mss35121_048_0448_0491/?sp=3

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as dirty and disorderly as the most bucolic person could desire.⁴²

To change the scenic effects, Olmsted moved the barns and outhouses out of sight and re-routed the approach road to follow a graceful curve. He also added turf to the border of the farm pond and added water plants. Kingsbury observed that with a few simple strokes and for minimum expense, Olmsted had transformed the site from a “dirty disagreeable farmyard to a gentleman’s house.”⁴³ It is not known if Olmsted planned or made any improvements to the house itself. None are mentioned and his drawing shows it virtually as it is today, with the exception of square Greek Revival posts supporting the porch. These would have matched the other ca. 1839 changes, but all later photos show Victorian-era posts, which post-dated the Olmsted years.

By the end of three years Olmsted had also added a number of ornamental trees to the site, such as ginkgo, black walnut, mulberry, elm and others.⁴⁴ Within his period of residence, he also began to order dwarf pears, imported from France, became enthused about cultivating trees commercially, and invested in a small nursery business. This interested him because it appealed to his notions of scientific farming, about which he continued to educate himself, buying books on horticulture and pear growing, in addition to history and philosophy.⁴⁵ He wrote several letters to his father about his investments, opportunities, and successes.⁴⁶

In terms of actual farming, Olmsted’s plan was to transform Dr. Akerly’s wheat farm into one with more diverse crops. He experimented with cross-breeding corn, planted cabbage and turnips, and grew plums, raspberries, and other fruits.⁴⁷ This would allow the farm to be more economically competitive in the local market. Thanks to improvements in transportation (*i.e.* rail-road and canal), the New York City market saw an increase in the availability of cheaper crops, namely wheat from other areas of the country, and Olmsted wanted to position his farm on better economic footing.⁴⁸ Justin Martin pointed out that Olmsted had a keen sense of agricultural economics: “[w]hen New York City was flooded with peaches, he made a decision to switch to pears [and] began cultivating different varieties.”⁴⁹

Staten Island Friends and Neighbors in the 1840s-1850s

When Olmsted arrived in Staten Island, Richmond County was a rural area known for farming but also, with its proximity to Manhattan, as the site of summer homes of wealthy New Yorkers. As it had for Akerly, Olmsted’s large farmhouse provided ample room for numerous and continuous visitors, including family and friends. John

⁴² Frederick J. Kingsbury in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), 85.

⁴³ Frederick J. Kingsbury, in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), 86.

⁴⁴ Roper, *FLO*, 57.

⁴⁵ Several letters, 1849, in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), 77-81.

⁴⁶ Frederick Law Olmsted to John Olmsted, 14 March 1849, 6 November 1851, *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), 80-82.

⁴⁷ Barry Leo Delaney, ed. *The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted on Staten Island* (Staten Island: Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1983), 1.

⁴⁸ Justin Martin, *Genius of Place: The Life of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2011), 54.

⁴⁹ Martin, *Genius of Place*, 59.

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Olmsted and his entire family spent summers there and paid annual visits for the next several years. Olmsted's brother, John Hull, then studying medicine in New York City, and Charles Loring Brace, his close friend and a theology student, were also frequent weekend guests, as were Trask and George Hill, also friends and theology students, and numerous Olmsted cousins. Frederick Kingsbury, another friend, and Jim Geddes, son of his former mentor George Geddes, were also known to visit, among many other acquaintances.⁵⁰

Olmsted's neighbors included some highly influential members of New York society, including William Henry Vanderbilt (1821-1885), heir to a family fortune that would make him the wealthiest man in the world. Vanderbilt, who owned a nearby farm in the present-day neighborhood of New Dorp, has been described as "an über-gentleman farmer," since his interest in farming was more of a hobby than a profession.⁵¹ Olmsted's professional association with the Vanderbilt family began when they became neighbors. The Vanderbilt family were early settlers of Long Island, and Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt was born there in 1794; in 1855 he sent his son William and his family to manage the 186-acre farm at New Dorp, which was only two miles from Olmsted's farm. The younger Vanderbilt, who built a large Italianate style mansion on the site, was one of the first neighbors who took note of Olmsted's early landscape interventions at his farm, such as the planting of non-native trees around the farmhouse and the transformation of the farm pond into a landscaped water feature. Impressed with the results, Vanderbilt asked Olmsted to make some similar improvements at his own farm.⁵² This relatively small contract was the beginning of a professional relationship that lasted forty years and included numerous commissions, including the landscape designs for the Vanderbilt Mausoleum (Richard Morris Hunt, 1886) at the Moravian Cemetery in Staten Island and for the immense Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina.⁵³ Unfortunately, the New Dorp house is no longer extant.⁵⁴

Other Staten Island neighbors included William Cullen Bryant, owner and editor of the *Evening Post*, publisher George Palmer Putnam, and Judge William Emerson, the brother of the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. Olmsted's personal relationships with these influential New Yorkers had a substantial effect on his life. George Palmer was a significant help to Olmsted in launching his writing career. Perhaps most important was his relationship with Dr. Cyrus Perkins, a retired surgeon from Manhattan. Perkins, one of the first neighbors Olmsted met after his arrival in Staten Island, lived at nearby Holly Hill Farm with his wife and granddaughter, Mary Cleveland Bryant Perkins. Mary, who was described as "pretty, petite, and lively," quickly became a favorite of the Olmsted family, and in 1850 she married John Hull Olmsted. Following John's early death, she married his brother, Frederick Law Olmsted, in 1859. The two were married for 45 years.

Another important friend was Parke Godwin, a journalist, abolitionist, and later associate editor of *Putnam's Magazine*. Through Godwin's influence, Olmsted learned the basic tenants of Utopian Socialism, which "endeavored to improve the city through public institutions such as schools, parks, hospitals, and museums."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Roper, *FLO*, 58-62.

⁵¹ Martin, *Genius of Place*, 55.

⁵² Mitchell Grubler, *The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted on Staten Island* (Staten Island: Staten Island Museum, 1983), 3.

⁵³ Martin, *Genius of Place*, 360.

⁵⁴ After William Vanderbilt's death in 1885, the Staten Island farm was managed by his son, George Washington Vanderbilt II, who was also the owner of Biltmore. The New Dorp Farm was deeded to the US Air Force in 1919 and became part of Miller Field. The house was demolished and today the site is part of the Gateway National Recreation Area.

⁵⁵ Patricia Heintzelman, *Frederick Law Olmsted House (Fairsted) National Register of Historic Places Nomination*, March 9, 1977.

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These ideas meshed with Olmsted's own budding interest in civic improvement and public duty. Olmsted also became actively involved in the affairs of the local community. He was first a local businessman, with a farm and a successful nursery business. He served on the school board and the grand jury and wrote an article advocating for a plank road, the civic improvement that his mentor, George Geddes, had promoted. The road was built in 1853.⁵⁶ He helped to organize and promote membership in the Richmond County Agricultural Society, one of many such societies organized in the early nineteenth century throughout rural America that generally sought to advance social improvement while preserving the country's agrarian tradition.⁵⁷ As recording secretary, Olmsted wrote an "Appeal to the Citizens of Staten Island" that explained and endorsed the practical and moral benefits of modern scientific farming, good roads, and other forms of rural improvement.⁵⁸ Ideas such as these were promoted by numerous agricultural journals, and while these societies were successful in bringing about some changes in farming practices, they were unable to effect the larger social improvements that Olmsted and others were advocating. These civic activities marked the beginning of Olmsted's active work toward achieving democratic ideals and working to improve society.⁵⁹

Yet in spite of friendships, business connections, and progress on the farm, Olmsted was soon restless and, as Elizabeth Stevenson observed, [Olmsted's] ideas, emotions, and desires outran the aims with which he might have been content had he been only a farmer.⁶⁰ His restlessness was exacerbated in February 1850 by the death of Emma Brace, sister of his friend Charles, and the engagement of his brother to Mary Cleveland Bryant Perkins. And so, in March 1850, when Olmsted had been a Staten Island farmer for just two years, he wrote to his father pleading for funds to join his brother and the same friend, Charles Loring Brace, on a walking trip to England. Interestingly, he proposed abandoning the farm during the growing season and admitted that it was not a spontaneous request:

this winter I made up my mind that I would make no engagements, but on the contrary arrange every thing that there be as little in my business as possible to interfere with the plan to go to England in a year from next November –when I calculated that John would be in Europe, and either the farm would be sold, or the question of its ability to support me at least as a bachelor favorably settled.⁶¹

Olmsted argued that now that the immediate opportunity [for travel] had presented itself, the idea of settling down for life without having seen England was "cowardly" and that he was determined to do it even if he had to sell the farm and spend half his fortune. He argued that his ambition was still to make his farm profitable and that to surrender his ideas of husbandry and humanity would be hard [should he have to sell it to fund the trip], but that the knowledge he would gain [should his father fund the trip] would significantly affect his ability to

⁵⁶ This road seems to exist in name but is not intact.

⁵⁷ John C. Sa vagian, "Agricultural Societies, Antebellum," *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Vol. 11: Agriculture and Industry* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 139.

⁵⁸ Roper, *FLO*, 63.

⁵⁹ Grubler, *Legacy*, 1.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Stevenson, *Park Maker: A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000), ??

⁶¹ Frederick Law Olmsted to John Olmsted [1 March 1850], *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 338.

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carry out his ideas.⁶² It was a long letter in which he proposed several very different rationales for the trip, as if to see which one would secure his father's approval, including the suggestion that he would prove useful to his frailer brother, and it concluded with the hope that his father would not consider him a mere child or his desires "senseless romantic impulses only."⁶³ The letter, which suggested that the young farmer was not to be deterred, clearly illustrated how easily "the native restlessness stirred in him and perhaps disquieted his family."⁶⁴

John Olmsted not only complied with the request but agreed to watch the Staten Island farm in his son's absence, and on April 30, 1850, the trio set sail aboard the *Henry Clay* from New York bound for England. They spent the summer walking through England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Holland, and Belgium, and Olmsted kept copious notes about his experiences abroad. The English countryside captivated Olmsted, who wrote to Downing saying that he "had seen the best parts of England, spending two months traveling through it on foot, seeing the country of course to great advantage, so that I feel as if I had not merely seen the rural character but lived in it, and made it a part of me."⁶⁵ He extolled the beneficial qualities of the ordinary pastoral landscape more than the more dramatic sights and noted that what moved him was the way in which these ordinary features were connected together. Charles Beveridge has suggested that Olmsted's satisfaction with the English pastoral landscape was based on observing how centuries of settlement could merge the dwellings of many with their natural surroundings and achieve a higher form of civilization.⁶⁶ This melding of the natural and the naturalized was a characteristic of Olmsted's later designs.

In addition to letters, Olmsted also penned an article for Downing's *Horticulturalist* following his visit to Birkenhead Public Park in Liverpool, England. Birkenhead had recently been designed by Joseph Paxton and opened to the public in April 1847. Birkenhead was the first park in England to be financed with public funds, and Olmsted was especially impressed that Paxton's park was entirely created by humans: the designer had created a park with hills, trees, meadows, winding pathways and a pond all from 120-acres of farmland. In his article, Olmsted outlined the engineering Paxton employed for the underground drainage system that fed water to the pond and described the picturesque quality of the winding pathways, the impact on which was "a feeling of relief from the cramped, confined, and controlling circumstances of the street and the town."⁶⁷ Olmsted was clearly impressed with the technique, the effects, and most of all the results: the introduction of nature into the city and the urban park's accessibility to the general public.

Olmsted was most likely familiar with the efforts of Downing, William Cullen Bryant (his Staten Island neighbor), and others to convince New York City to set aside land for a public park, and Birkenhead must have

⁶² Frederick Law Olmsted to John Olmsted [1 March 1850], *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 338.

⁶³ Frederick Law Olmsted to John Olmsted [1 March 1850], *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 338.

⁶⁴ Stevenson, *ParkMaker*, 50.

⁶⁵ Frederick Law Olmsted to Alexander Jackson Downing, [23] November 1850, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 363.

⁶⁶ Charles Beveridge, Introduction to *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. II, 1852-1857, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 7.

⁶⁷ The article appeared in the *Horticulturalist* in May 1851.

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helped to crystalize his ideas about the civilizing effects of naturalistic urban parks. In fact, Downing, who was a key advocate for creating Central Park, published Olmsted's article in his magazine to help build early public support for a similar park in New York.

Olmsted later elaborated on his visit to Birkenhead Park in glowing terms: "Five minutes of admiration ... and I was ready to admit that in democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this People's Garden. Indeed, gardening, had here reached a perfection that I had never before dreamed of. I cannot undertake to describe the effect of so much taste and skill as had evidently been employed."⁶⁸ Olmsted expressed his delight that "the privileges of the garden were enjoyed about equally by all classes. There were some who were attended by servants, and sent at once for their carriages, but a larger proportion were of the common ranks, and a few women with children, or suffering from ill health, were evidently the wives of very humble laborers. There were a number of strangers, and some we observed with notebooks and portfolios, that seemed to have come from a distance to study the garden." He also took care to mention that rather than neglect the needs of the poor, the designers had incorporated public bathing and washing houses for the town.⁶⁹

Olmsted also took keen notes on the drainage system, road construction, and other details of how the park was designed, engineered and financed. The visit to Birkenhead also inspired him to bring back to Staten Island an innovative English tile making machine that fabricated tiles that could be used to line drainage pipes on farmland. It was not the first such machine, but it was one of the first imported into the United States. Perhaps his most important lesson in park planning was that "the magnificent pleasure ground was entirely, unreservedly and for ever the people's own. The poorest peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts as the British queen."⁷⁰ The rights of the ordinary American to enjoy the restorative powers of the American landscape would become a keystone of Olmsted's civic work.

Olmsted was deeply affected by the trip abroad, and most of his feelings were contained in the letters and journals that he compiled upon his return, encouraged by his neighbor, publisher George Putnam Palmer, and published as *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* in 1852. In many parts of the book he tried to explain the appeal of the English pastoral landscape and especially to compare it to America, which was wilder and less cultivated:

There is usually a much milder light over an English landscape than an American, And the distinct and shady parts are more indistinct. It is rare that there is not a haziness, slightly like that of our Indian summer in the atmosphere, and colours of every thing, except of the foliage are less brilliant and vivacious than we are accus-tomed to. The sublime or the picturesque in nature is much more rare in England, except on the seacoast, than in

⁶⁸ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer* [1852], in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 96.

⁶⁹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer* [1852], in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 96-99.

⁷⁰ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer* [1852], in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 98.

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America; but there is every where a great deal of quiet, peaceful, graceful beauty, which the works of man have generally added to, and which I remember but little at home that will to compare with. This Herefordshire reminds me of the valley in Connecticut, between Middletown and Springfield. The valley of the Mohawk and the upper part of the Hudson, is also in some parts English-like.⁷¹

Here again, Olmsted observed that the effects of centuries of settlement and cultivation on nature could create a vision of an idealized civilization.

Not all of what Olmsted saw was inspiring. He was also deeply distressed by the extreme poverty he witnessed and especially by the vast contrasts in wealth and poverty that existed between the upper and lower classes. He especially deplored – and criticized - the conditions of the English laborers, pointing out that their circumstances were worse than he had seen anywhere.⁷² Most disturbing was the assumption in English society that the dirt-poor lower class occupied a fixed and permanent state, that society could or would do nothing to improve the lot of these unfortunates. This was a direct affront to Olmsted’s belief in social improvement. But just as he criticized, so was he challenged, repeatedly, by the British on the issue of American slavery; the English “scolded him--unjustly, he thought---for his part in allowing slavery to exist, as if all Americans...were responsible for it.”⁷³ This put Olmsted’s still conservative views on slavery to the test. While he was not yet an abolitionist, he believed in a paternalist system in which the enslavers were obliged to educate, teach, “civilize,” moralize, and otherwise “raise” the enslaved to the level where they could live as equals in a civilized world. However, the new Fugitive Slave Law, passed in 1850, which punished northerners who assisted escaped slaves, forced him to confront the issue less passively and more directly. What would he personally do if person who had escaped from slavery showed up at his door? His views were influenced by visits to Staten Island from abolitionists Theodore Parker and William Lloyd Garrison, sent by friend Charles Loring Brace, a staunch abolitionist; however, ultimately, Olmsted did not fully embrace slavery as evil until his own mind expanded as a thinker and critic.⁷⁴

When Olmsted returned to America - after only four months abroad - he was technically still a farmer. However, he was well into the journey toward the next important stage of his career as a writer and critic, and he was far less inclined to settle back into the ordinary life of a farmer. Instead, he was filled with a drive to take some sort of action to remedy social problems. He had begun to think in a much larger context about the kind of social practices and innovations that might improve society. As Albert Fein noted:

Although the principal purpose of the trip was to report on agricultural matters, it is quite clear from the book Olmsted published [*Walks and Talks*] and from the record of that trip left by his traveling companion and childhood friend, Charles

⁷¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer* [1852], in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect: 1822-1903*, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Theodora Kimball, eds. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), 106.

⁷² Rybczynski, *A Clearing*, 100.

⁷³ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks*, vol. 1, 221, in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), page

⁷⁴ Charles Capen McLaughlin, “Frederick Law Olmsted: His Life and Work,” in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 12.

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Loring Brace, that they had immersed themselves in a whole range of environmental and social matters. Most significant was Olmsted's awareness that such critical problems as urbanization, poverty, crime, and prostitution were international in scope. Environmental planning and design was an international issue, and Olmsted, like Brace, had profited from the various reform experiments being pioneered abroad.⁷⁵

Although he still resided on a Staten Island farm, Olmsted turned less of his attention to farming and spent less time on Staten Island. Instead, he spent the next two years pursuing other occupations, especially writing and traveling. Olmsted's first book (*Walks and Talks*) was well-received, and one reviewer even said that "[Olmsted's] sketches of landscape, and of particular scenes and objects in the landscape, exhibit such warmth of feeling, such a practical knowledge, as we would only expect in one exclusively devoted to the study of nature."⁷⁶ With this encouragement, Olmsted decided to turn his attention toward a new career; he would become a writer.

Journeys to the South

His next trip was an invitation from the editor of the *New-York Daily Times* to travel through the south as a roving reporter, giving him the chance to observe slavery in some depth; however, the trip was actually initiated by Charles Loring Brace, who knew that *Times* editor Henry Raymond was looking for just such a writer and suggested that the editor hire him.⁷⁷ Thus was initiated Olmsted's major education on the issues surrounding slavery. Over the next fourteen months, Olmsted made two journeys through the southern states and wrote seventy-five letters that were published in newspapers and later compiled into two large books on the subject.⁷⁸ Charles Beveridge has described the first book as "the most extensive and detailed description of the society of the antebellum South by a contemporary observer."⁷⁹ For scholars in the twenty-first century, Olmsted's literary work provides an unvarnished perspective of the social, political, and economic climate of the south in the period leading up to the United States Civil War.

After hiring a hired a caretaker to live in the farmhouse and work on his farm, on December 11, 1852, Olmsted departed for four months, during which he traveled across the south touring several southern plantations and observing the lives of the enslaved.⁸⁰ Keeping detailed records of his observations, Olmsted penned articles under the pseudonym "Yeoman" for the *Times*, giving his northern audience firsthand accounts of life in the pre-Civil War South. These accounts became the basis for *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (pub.1856). The second trip, undertaken between November 10, 1853 and early August 1854, in which he was accompanied by his brother, John Hull Olmsted, was a tour of the southwest, and his letters to newspapers became the basis

⁷⁵ Albert Fein, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition* (New York: Braziller, 1972) 16. Fein based this on *Walks and Talks* and two books by Brace.

⁷⁶ in Rybczynski, *A Clearing*, 101.

⁷⁷ Charles Beveridge, Introduction to *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. II, 1852-1857*, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 9.

⁷⁸ Charles Beveridge, Introduction to *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. II, 1852-1857*, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 1.

⁷⁹ Charles Beveridge, "Frederick Law Olmsted," *American National Biography*, John Garraty and Mark Carnes, eds. (New York : Oxford University Press, 1999) <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/olmsted/summary.html>

⁸⁰ Stevenson, *ParkMaker*, 71.

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for his next book, *A Journey Through Texas*, published in 1857, two years after he left Staten Island.⁸¹ By 1857 Olmsted was also writing *A Journey in the Back Country* [pub. 1860], again based on a series of letters to newspapers. The latter series culminated in 1857, just as he was appointed superintendent of Central Park.

In the newspaper articles written during his Staten Island period, Olmsted examined the agricultural economy of the south, specifically the effects of slavery on the southern economy. He concluded that an economy based on free labor was superior. Those who were enslaved were so encumbered by degradation and hopelessness that they had no incentive for improvement and they had, in fact, lowered the standards of work in general. The spur of competition in the north produced innovation and advancement, while the southern economy was stagnant. While he did not find the situation of the enslaved as harsh as that of the famine-starved Irish, at this point he had not seen many of the larger plantations, where the living conditions and treatment might be worse. Yet, in considering whether the treatment of blacks was humane and civilized, Olmsted was testing his own originally held belief in the idea that slavery could be seen in a paternalistic light and he was hoping that the enslavers were involved in an effort to improve the lives of the “uncivilized heathens” so that they could one day live as free and productive members of society. In this he was gravely disappointed. Although Olmsted still failed to condemn slavery outright, his assessment of the region was dire. His observations were brutal, portraying southern life as stagnant and backward.⁸² Rather than have any part in efforts to educate, care for, and/or enlighten the souls under their care, the southern planters were neither culturally nor socially responsible men; their interest lay only in protecting their own economic benefits and they had no thought that they or anyone else should improve the lives of those they were responsible for.⁸³ Their sole interest in protecting slavery and encouraging its expansion was based on materialism and selfishness.

The highlight of his second trip to the south was his encounter with a group of free-soil, reform-minded German farmers in the area around San Antonio, Texas. The latter worked their farms without the use of enslaved labor. These farms, in stark contrast to slave plantations, were grouped in tight-knit communities and operated in an environment that fostered enlightened economic advancement and the perpetuation of cultural traditions. They presented a dramatic contrast to the plantations, which were stagnant, anti-democratic places. More important, the Germans envisioned creating a free society in the region that embodied republican ideals, and, with that goal, they created a forum for political action. In 1854, a group of these settlers created an alliance of like-minded Germans in order to influence the presidential election of 1856. Their platform, which declared slavery an evil, was full of other progressive and democratic ideas. Their planning for a May 1854 rally coincided with Olmsted’s visit in March. Unfortunately, later violence and threats of violence against the Germans, instigated by a strong local pro-slavery faction, intervened, crushing the movement, and it was Olmsted’s full comprehension of these events that finally led him – in fall 1854 - to understand the grave danger that the

⁸¹ The first part of which was, to a large extent, actually compiled by John Hull Olmsted; Charles Beveridge, Introduction to *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. II, 1852-1857*, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 12

⁸² Charles Capen McLaughlin, “Frederick Law Olmsted: His Life and Work,” in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. I, 1822 to 1852*, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 13.

⁸³ Charles Beveridge, Introduction to *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. II, 1852-1857*, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 12-17.

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expansion of slavery posed to a democratic society.⁸⁴ By the end of the second trip, Olmsted fully comprehended that slavery was a curse on the country.⁸⁵ His worst fears were realized by the even more violent events in Kansas a few months later. By 1857, Olmsted was actively helping free farmers emigrate to Kansas and protecting those who were already there.⁸⁶

Thus, by 1855, Frederick Law Olmsted was fully engaged in thinking, writing, and worrying about the greatest social problem of the decade – slavery. Meanwhile, the farm suffered, while Olmsted relied on his father’s financial support to keep it afloat. “Pears fell off the trees; cabbages froze and rotted in the field for lack of timely harvesting.”⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the elder Olmsted, who still held a mortgage on the farm, remained confident that there was income potential in the property, even though it had been neglected for the last two years. It was his father who encouraged Olmsted to sign over the deed to his brother and sister-in-law, who had been living at Tosomock Farm since 1853 with their children.⁸⁸ John, who was suffering from tuberculosis, was not happy about the idea and wrote to his half-sister Bertha, “I regret to be left in the lurch, but I suppose things will go on as they did in [Frederick’s] absence last summer.”⁸⁹

In April 1855, Olmsted, eager to start the next phase of his career as well as to earn a living, became a partner in the New York publishing firm of Dix, Edwards, and Co, left the Staten Island farm for rented rooms on Lower Broadway in Manhattan.⁹⁰ This marked a formal conclusion to the farming career he had mentally left several years ago. Until January 1856 he also acted as publisher of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*. Olmsted’s publishing career was also short, and on September 11, 1857, he was appointed superintendent of Central Park.

Importance of this period in Olmsted’s Life

Albert Fein has posited that Olmsted’s most important contribution was to conceive physical form as a function of social planning.⁹¹ In other words, Olmsted envisioned needed improvements to society and created design solutions to them. Central Park, in which Olmsted created a naturalistic landscape in the heart of a dense urban city in order to bring the healing powers of nature to the everyday citizen, is only the most obvious example. Fein goes on to note that Olmsted was a social critic before he was a landscape architect and that his greatest works drew on a variety of intellectual disciplines. Still, Fein continues, “there is no simple explanation for Olmsted’s transition from scientific farmer to environmental planner and designer.”⁹² Instead, Fein cites four experiences between 1850 and 1857 as of pivotal importance in enlarging and expanding Olmsted’s perspective

⁸⁴ Charles Beveridge, Introduction to *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. II, 1852-1857*, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 18-20.

⁸⁵ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (1863), in Charles Capen McLaughlin, “Frederick Law Olmsted: His Life and Work,” in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. 1, 1822 to 1852*, Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 15.

⁸⁶ In just one example, see Frederick Law Olmsted to James B. Abbot, 17 September [1855], in which Olmsted refers to a fund that he and others have established for the Kansas farmers. In *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. II, 1852-1857*, Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 365-66.

⁸⁷ M.M. Graff, *The Men Who Made Central Park* (n.p., n.d.), 16-17.

⁸⁸ Deed recorded in Richmond County, New York on May 18, 1855, liber 36, page 271.

⁸⁹ John Hull Olmsted to Bertha Olmsted, 6 May 1855, in Rybczynski, *A Clearing*, 135.

⁹⁰ See H. Wilson, *Trow’s New York City Directory for the Year Ending May 1, 1858* (New York: John F. Trow Publishing), 635.

⁹¹ Fein, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 14-15.

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and transformative in shaping his future career. The first was his move to Staten Island in 1848; there he was exposed to the literary and cultural elite of the city and he began to explore larger ideas about social improvement through social institutions. The second was his 1850 walking tour of England, where he absorbed social problems that were international in scope and explored European approaches to solutions. The third was his anti-slavery campaign, which began as a journey to observe and understand in the early 1850s and ended in his full denunciation of slavery as an evil in 1855. This led him to an understanding of the tension between environmental and social issues inherent in slavery and its polarizing effects, which called for new approaches to national policy planning. Justin Marin has noted that “what sets Olmsted’s landscape architecture creations apart is his desire to create democratic spaces. This was borne out in his Southern travels, when he observed slavery’s disastrous consequences on culture and democracy.”⁹³

And finally, Olmsted’s short stint as part-owner and editor of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, a national forum for liberal thought, brought Olmsted into contact with a wider range of thinkers and critics. Together these four experiences helped to expand Olmsted’s interest in scientific farming to encompass larger and more complex issues of national importance and contributed to the development of his vision of the modern urban park as a prototype for the improved urban environment.⁹⁴ All but the last of these experiences took place during the years that Olmsted lived in the nominated farmhouse on Staten Island. Although some of these experiences involved traveling, it was here that he returned to reflect upon them and to compile the major literary works through which he disseminated his views to other intellectuals and to the American public. Although the farm itself no longer exists, the farmhouse where Olmsted lived and worked retains integrity to Olmsted’s period (1848-1855) and is the only surviving resource associated with this period of Olmsted’s life.

Farm after Frederick Law Olmsted

John Hull Olmsted lived at Tosomock Farm with his wife, Mary, and their three children (John Charles, Charlotte, and Owen Frederick) until 1857, when John succumbed to tuberculosis while traveling in Europe. His wife and children spent the summer of 1858 at the farm before moving to a rented row house in Manhattan in October 1858.⁹⁵ On June 13, 1859, Frederick Law Olmsted married his brother’s widow, Mary, in a private ceremony officiated by New York Mayor Daniel Fawcett Tiemann.⁹⁶

Although the Olmsted family never called the Staten Island farm home again, Mary Perkins Olmsted retained title of the farm until 1866, when it was sold for \$20,000 to Dr. William C. Anderson. Anderson never lived there but used the farm to grow vegetables to accommodate his patients’ special diets. The house was renovated two decades later by a new owner, Erastus Wiman, a Canadian immigrant and developer of the Staten Island Railway Company.⁹⁷ Wiman purchased a 125-acre tract and made “improvements,” creating

⁹² Fein, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 14-15.

⁹³ Justin Martin to Glen Umberger, April 5, 2019.

⁹⁴ Fein, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 15-17.

⁹⁵ The house was on East 79th St between 3rd and 4th Avenues; it is no longer extant.

⁹⁶ Roper, *FLO*, 142.

⁹⁷ “For Erastus Wiman, St. George Was a Golden Opportunity,” *Staten Island Advance*, March 27, 2011.

https://www.silive.com/specialreports/index.ssf/2011/03/for_erastus_wiman_st_george_wa.html

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“recreational grounds” and an inn which he named, “The Woods of Arden.” According to a contemporary advertisement in the *New York Times*:

The Woods of Arden contains about 130 acres of thickly timbered land on the south side of the island, overlooking the Lower Bay, Sandy Hook, and the ocean. The ground has been fenced in down to the sea beach, and winding walks and drives have been cut among the trees. The object in view has been to make it a day resort of a high character. A fine old farmhouse, built in Colonial days, stands on high sloping ground facing the sea. This has been fitted up as a first class restaurant and named the Inn of Arden....

Croquet grounds and lawn tennis courts have been laid out on the lawns around the Inn, and down on the beach arrangements have been made for bathing, boating, and fishing. Several bedrooms have been fitted up in the Inn for fishing parties and those who go to the Woods of Arden to stay overnight.The managers have spent money lavishly to make attractive what is naturally a beautiful spot....⁹⁸

By the turn of the twentieth century, the popularity of the resort led to new development, as a section of Olmsted’s farm was subdivided into several residential lots by the Seaside Estate Company. This development (ca. 1910) was known as Seaside Estates and featured modest-sized, wood-framed houses constructed along the new Southfield Boulevard (which cut directly through the farm) and larger villa-style houses along the shoreline of Raritan Bay separated by a new road, Wakefield Road, running parallel to the boulevard. Another new road, Woods of Arden Road, was cut through the former farm following Olmsted’s meandering driveway from Amboy Road. The Seaside Estate Company also built several wood-framed and brick houses along Southfield Boulevard on lots immediately to the east of Olmsted’s former farmhouse, then called the Woods of Arden House or the Inn of Arden. A private entrance driveway to the inn from Woods of Arden Road was also constructed for the convenience of the guests. At this same time, another development to the south, known as Southfield Park, was being developed by the Westchester Land Improvement Company. Building lots were laid out in an orthogonal grid along a new road, Arden Avenue, running parallel to Woods of Arden Road and perpendicular to Southfield Boulevard. Southfield Boulevard would be renamed Hylan Boulevard in 1923. Following World War II, the Eltingville area experienced a surge of residential development, which further subdivided Olmsted’s former farm with several new houses encroaching on the historic farmhouse, isolating it from Hylan Boulevard to the east and Woods of Arden Road to the south.

After 1858, when the Olmsteds left, no one used the farmhouse as a principal residence for over a century. However, in 1961, the house was sold to Carlton Beil, a curator at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan. Beil purchased the property from John E. Cullen, a local amateur photographer who had completed his own restoration of the house in 1946, when he acquired the property. Beil took a special interest in the property, especially in the trees that were said to have been planted by Olmsted. It is not known which features

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in the house were changed by either of these two owners; however, some changes in finishes were noted in the living and dining rooms (see item 7) and updated kitchen or bathrooms are also likely.

In 1965, following the passage of New York City's landmark legislation, local preservationists sought protection for the house. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the building (then known as the Poillon House) as an individual landmark on February 28, 1967, making it one of the first landmarks to be designated on Staten Island following the creation of the commission in 1965.⁹⁹ The Beil family sold the house in September 2006 to the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, which created the small Olmsted-Beil House Park, encompassing all that was left of the farm. The Beil family hoped that the sale to the city would preserve the house and Olmsted's legacy for future generations. After acquiring the property, the parks department announced that it would use the house for educational purposes and the surrounding land as a public park. Fourteen years later, those plans remain unrealized and, following a recent fire in the kitchen ell, the house remains vacant and the park overgrown.

In the summer of 2017, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, which had provided a grant to help stabilize the house in 2001, was alerted that the house and park were in a severely neglected state and launched a nationwide campaign to bring attention to this endangered landmark. In 2017, conservancy staff conducted several site visits to assess the state of the property and commissioned an updated conditions assessment report to identify sources and levels of deterioration and determine appropriate remedial measures. The report, completed in January 2018, made several recommendations for stabilization to be undertaken in two phases: urgent (to ensure public safety) and necessary (to forestall deterioration). The conservancy is currently seeking grant funds to complete these projects. In addition, a local group, Friends of Olmsted-Beil House Inc., has recently incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation to help care for the house once remedial work has been completed.

Frederick Law Olmsted after Staten Island

In 1858, following a brief, though significant, career in journalism, Frederick Law Olmsted and English-born architect Calvert Vaux won the competition to design New York City's Central Park with their "Greensward Plan."¹⁰⁰ In the plan, Olmsted fashioned curved driveways which created dramatic approaches through landscaped spaces. He successfully combined natural elements (including the planting of trees, excavating man-made ponds, and creating meadows) with architectural elements (bridges, archways, and buildings) to create one of his most important landscapes. Additionally, Olmsted specified the use of exotic species of trees, which provided a strong visual interest to the spaces. To increase acreage for the park and create naturally appearing waterways, Olmsted used the same drainage system he discovered while in England. These design elements, according to Charles Beveridge, were "crucially important for the rest of his career."¹⁰¹ In 1861, after numerous battles with politicians and park commissioners, Olmsted left his position as superintendent of the park and became executive secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission, a position he held until 1863,

⁹⁸ "In the Woods of Arden: A New Resort on the Ocean Shore of Staten Island," *New York Times*, June 21, 1886.

⁹⁹ Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Poillon House*.

¹⁰⁰ Central Park was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1963 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1966.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in C.J. Hughes, "A Lab, a Home, a Memory," *New York Times*, August 4, 2012.

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when he resigned after suffering exhaustion from overwork. Within a month, the restless Olmsted accepted a position with the Mariposas Company gold mine in Rancho Las Mariposas, California, where he worked until the company went bankrupt in 1865, at which time Olmsted returned to New York.

Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux formed Olmsted, Vaux & Company later in 1865 and in the summer of 1866, Olmsted returned to Staten Island, where he lived in a rented house with his family in the village of Clifton [no longer extant]. Nearby sat Vanderbilt's Landing, from which Olmsted commuted daily to Brooklyn while working on Prospect Park, one of Olmsted, Vaux & Company's first commissions. The firm later designed many of the nation's great urban parks, including Riverside Park in suburban Chicago and city park systems for Buffalo, New York, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Olmsted's later commissions include Washington and Jackson Parks in Chicago (1870), the Emerald Necklace in Boston (1885), and Belle Isle Park in Detroit (1880).

Olmsted established his landscape architectural practice in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1883 at Fairsted, the former Joshua Clark house, where Olmsted lived and worked until his death in 1903. Fairsted was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. Besides Fairsted, the nominated farmhouse is the only extant house that was owned and occupied by Olmsted himself.¹⁰²

¹⁰² According to the Fairsted National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, at the time of his death in 1903, Olmsted owned a few small lots in Brooklyn and a rowhouse at 209 West 46 Street in Manhattan. This building is no longer extant.

Olmsted Farmhouse
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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

preliminary determination of individual listing
 previously listed in the National Register
 previously determined eligible by the National Register
 designated a National Historic Landmark

Primary location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #
 recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #

Other
Name of repository: NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.57 acres
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>18</u>	<u>571340</u>	<u>4487135</u>	3	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	4	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary is indicated by a heavy line on the enclosed map with scale.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary was drawn to encompass current lot associated with the Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. Farmhouse, which encompasses all of the property once associated with the farm that retains integrity to Olmsted's period of residence. While unfortunate, the loss of the farmland does not compromise the integrity of this property, which is significant because Olmsted resided there during a significant period in his intellectual development.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	<u>Glen K. Umberger, Manager of Special Projects -</u>	Revised and edited by	<u>Kathleen LaFrank,</u>
	<u>glenumberger@nylandmarks.org</u>		<u>NYSHPO</u>
organization	<u>New York Landmarks Conservancy</u>	date	<u>July 2020</u>
street & number	<u>One Whitehall Street, 21 Floor</u>	telephone	<u>212-995-5260</u>
city or town	<u>New York</u>	state	<u>NY</u> zip code <u>10004</u>

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property _____

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.

- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

SEE PHOTOS BELOW

Name of Property: Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. Farmhouse

City or Vicinity: Staten Island

County: Richmond State: New York

Photographer:

Date Photographed:

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

1 of ____.

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

Richmond County, NY
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Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name _____
street & number _____ telephone _____
city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

Olmsted Farmhouse
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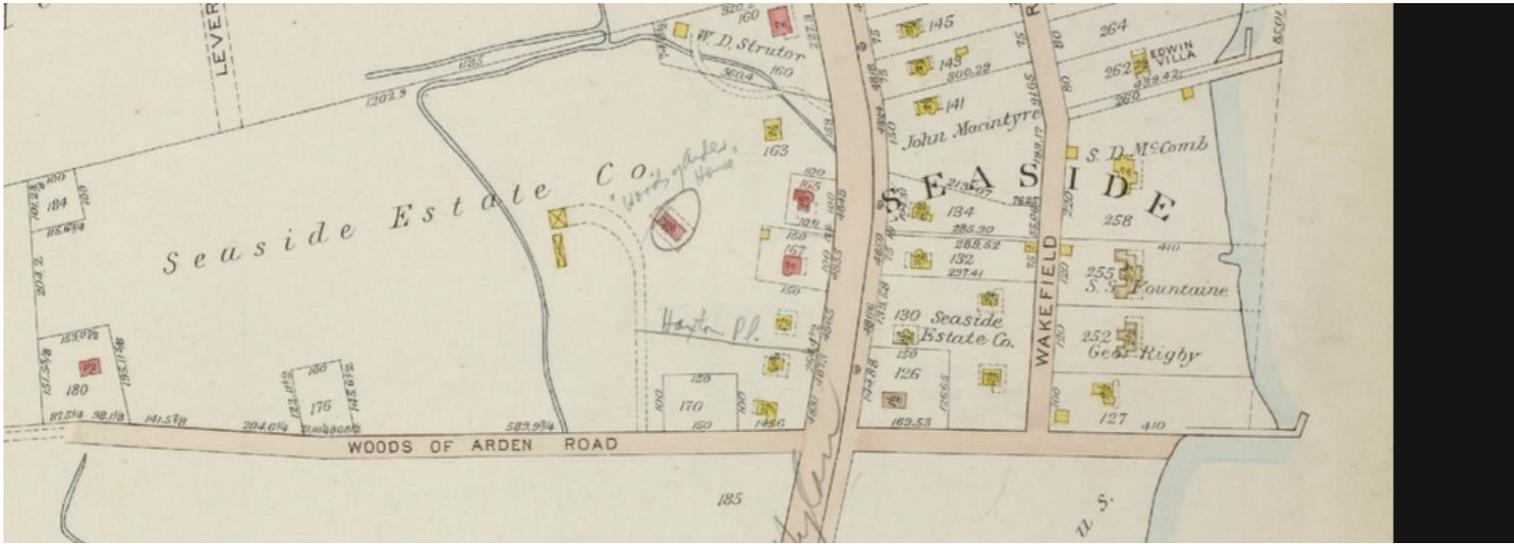
Olmsted Farm 1853



Looking north

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

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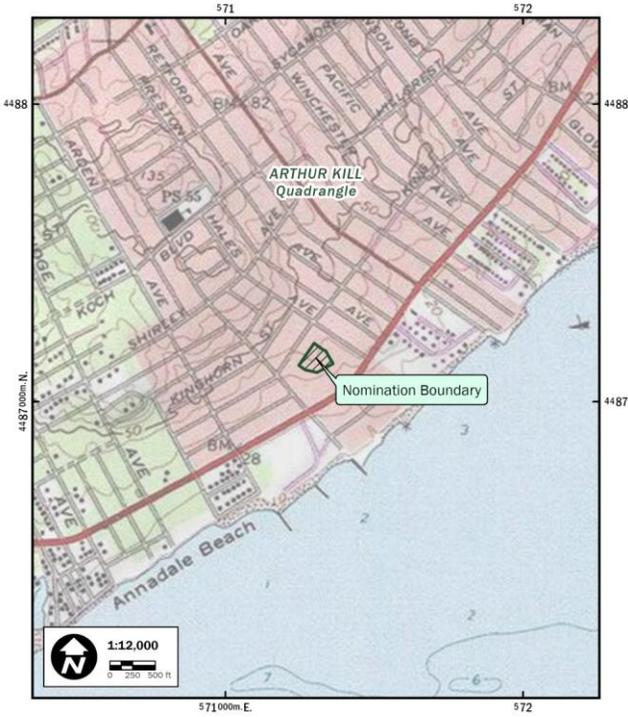
Former Olmsted Farmhouse ca. 1917 – (circled) part of resort-looking

Olmsted Farmhouse
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Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. Farmhouse
Borough of Staten Island, Richmond County, New York

4515 Hylan Boulevard
Staten Island, NY 10312



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter

 Nomination Boundary

 Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

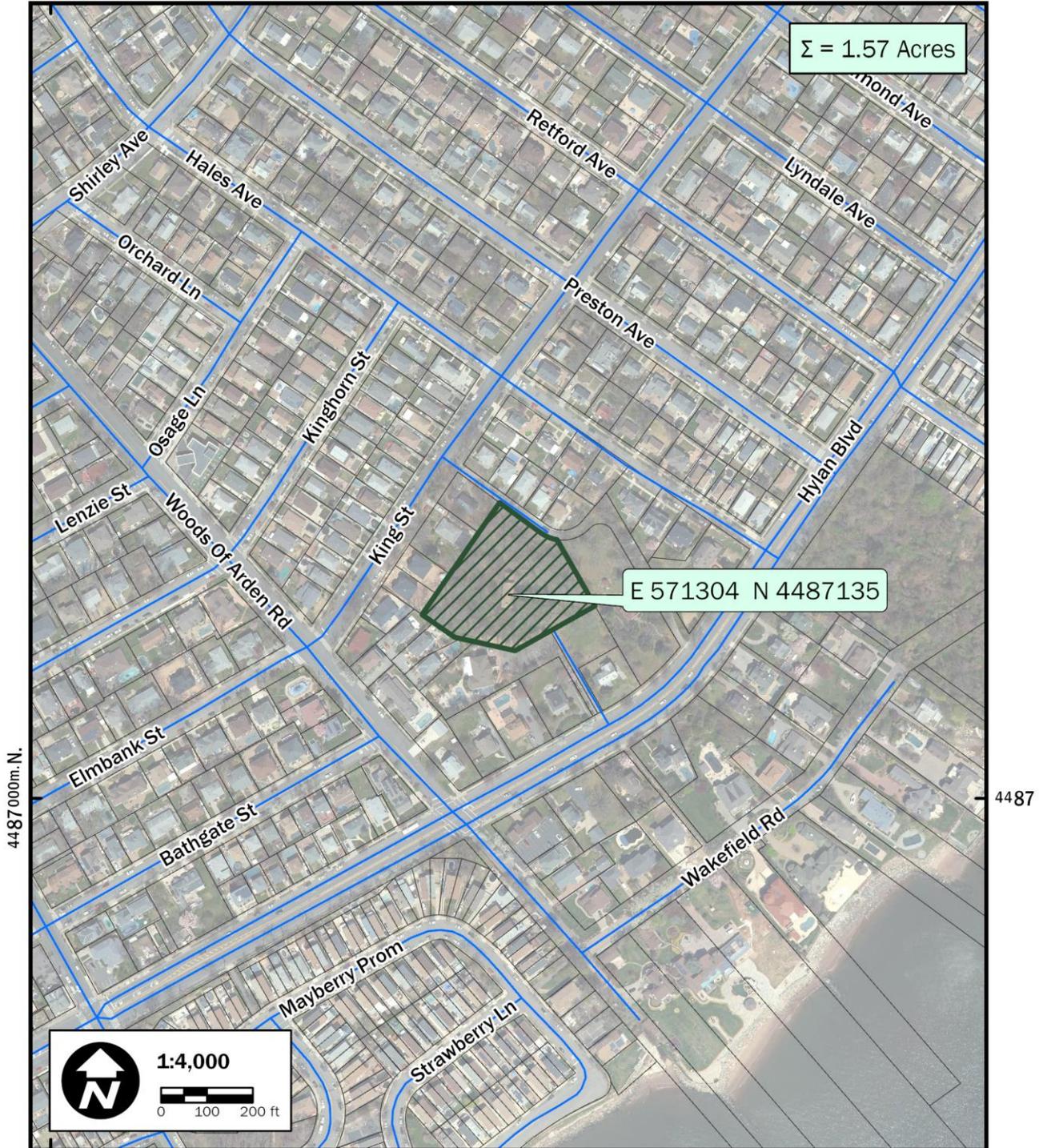
Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

Richmond County, NY
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Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. Farmhouse
Borough of Staten Island, Richmond County, New York

4515 Hylan Boulevard
Staten Island, NY 10312

571



571000m.E.

Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter

 Nomination Boundary



Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation

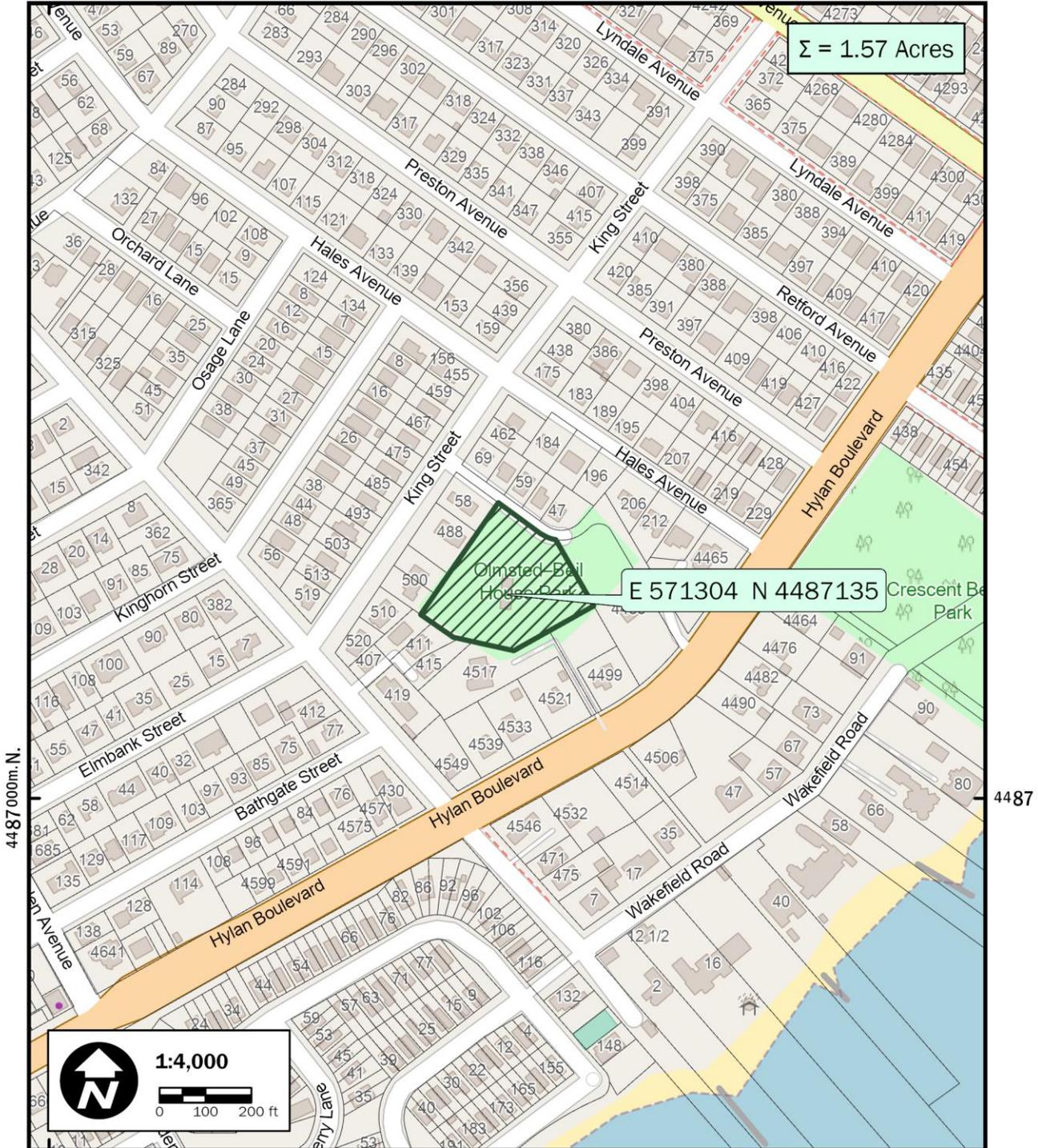
Olmsted Farmhouse
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Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. Farmhouse
Borough of Staten Island, Richmond County, New York

4515 Hylan Boulevard
Staten Island, NY 10312

571



571000m.E.

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 Nomination Boundary



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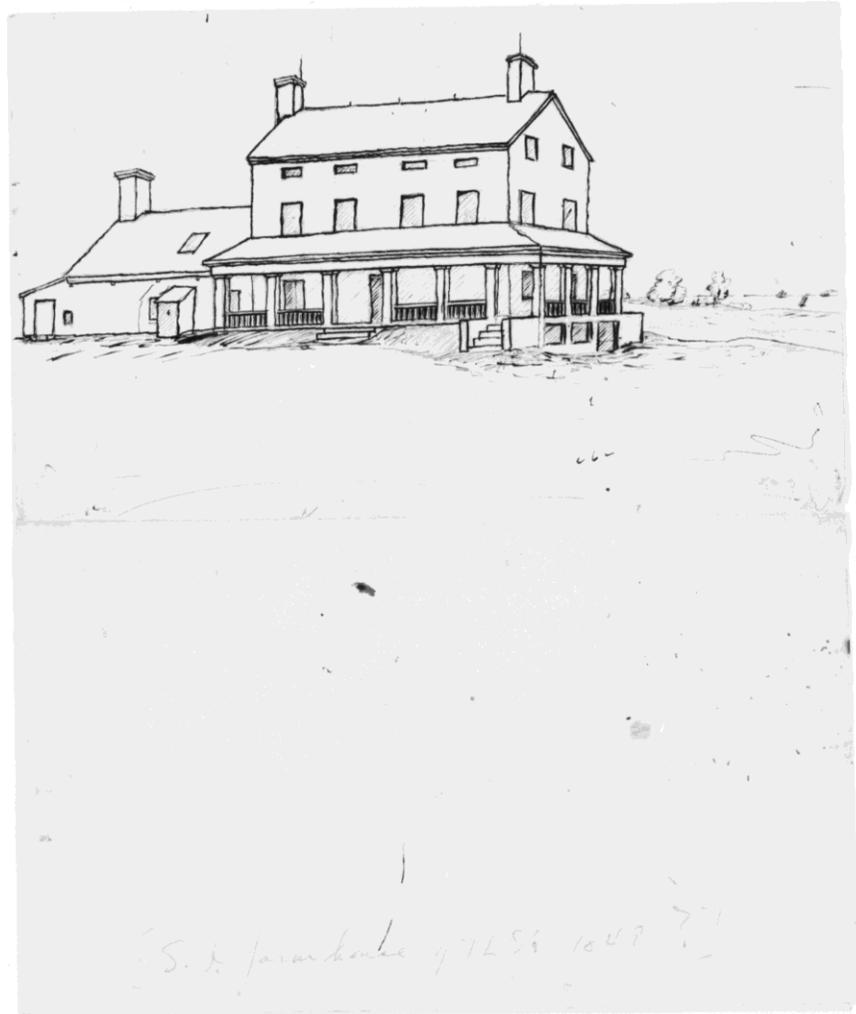
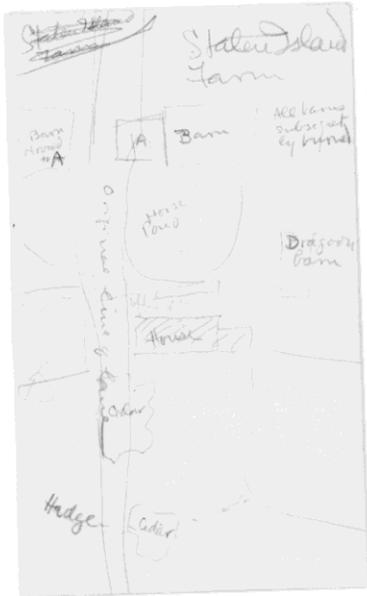
 Nomination Boundary



**Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation**

Olmsted Farmhouse
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Olmsted 's sketch of the farmhouse and landscape plan - c1848 – west elevation

Olmsted Farmhouse
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c1910 – south and east elevations

Olmsted Farmhouse
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1937-west

elevation

Olmsted Farmhouse
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Richmond County, NY
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1937 – west elevation

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

Richmond County, NY
County and State



Façade (east elevation)

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

Richmond County, NY
County and State



East elevation

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

Richmond County, NY
County and State



East and north elevations;

kitchen wing

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

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façade (east elevation), north elevation, kitchen wing)

Olmsted Farmhouse
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West (rear) elevation

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

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Interior: center hall

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

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Interior: Dining room and door to center hall

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

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Interior: dining room mantel and door to kitchen addition

Olmsted Farmhouse
Name of Property

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Interior: Living Room

Olmsted Farmhouse
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Interior: second floor, end bedroom with mantel

Olmsted Farmhouse
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Interior: second floor bedroom

Olmsted Farmhouse
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m
Interior: third floor bedroom