



Bidding Farewell to the Olmsted Elm



Left: Guests gather on the South Lawn during a teacher institute in 2009. Photo by Joel Veak. Below: South Lawn photographed circa 1900. Both photos courtesy of NPS, Olmsted NHS. Background: "Plan of F.L. Olmsted Estate, Brookline, Mass.," 1904. Plan by White and Wetherbee, Civil Engineers. Courtesy of NPS, Olmsted NHS.

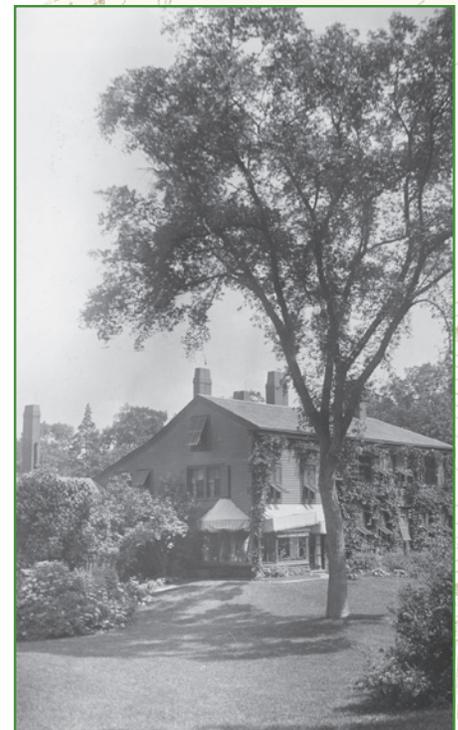
The National Park Service/Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site (Olmsted NHS) is preparing to bid farewell to its "Olmsted Elm" due to its hazardous condition. The tree removal is expected to take place at the end of March. The National Park Service (NPS) hopes to replace the elm with a genetic clone derived from the original tree once the ground has been prepared and one of several clones, or propagules, has reached sufficient size.

This American elm was on the landscape when Frederick Law Olmsted bought this property he called "Fairsted" in 1883, moving his family and landscape architecture business to 99 Warren Street, Brookline. While Olmsted and his stepson John C. Olmsted removed other trees from the estate, they kept this particular tree as an important feature

of the pastoral landscape they created in the southern portion of the then-two-acre property.

A FAMILIAR PIECE OF HISTORY

The American elm (*Ulmus americana*) is a native plant species with special significance to Frederick Law Olmsted and his landscapes. In County Essex in England, where the Olmsted family originated, the name "Olmsted" is a variation of "Elmsted," meaning "place of the elms." When he began his involvement with landscape design, the American elm was a ubiquitous, hardy and popular species, occurring naturally and often planted by choice. Olmsted sometimes utilized solitary elms or small clumps of elms in his pastoral landscape designs, of which the South Lawn at Fairsted is one example. He also used the elm in more formal





compositions, as in the promenade at Central Park's mall. In New England and the Midwest, the American elm became the most popular street tree of the early 20th century before the scourge of Dutch elm disease entered the United States from Western Europe in the 1930s. By 1970, it was estimated that 77 million elms in this country had succumbed to that disease. Today the graceful vase-shaped American elm is a rare sight, though other more disease-tolerant elm varieties are becoming popular.

CARING FOR AN AGING TREE

The Olmsted Elm at Fairsted, which may be 200 years old, is seriously declining in health and, as a result, its structural stability has been compromised. Symptoms have included crown dieback, shedding of bark and branches, spreading infections of wood and root decay fungi, and the widening of a vertical seam along the main trunk. Together, these symptoms are increasing the risk of tree failure and potential damage to the adjacent Olmsted house. In July 2010, a twenty-four inch diameter limb was removed after it cracked just above the trunk; fortunately the NPS was able to remove the limb before it caused any damage.

In addition, the tree has been impacted by infections of Dutch elm disease over the past decade. The most recent infection was in 2009 and caused progressive dieback of the canopy which has further contributed to the elm's decline. As the

elm has continued to deteriorate, the NPS staff has taken careful steps to promote the tree's longevity while minimizing risks of sudden failure. When Dutch elm disease infections have occurred, the NPS has treated the tree with fungicides and carefully pruned out dead and deteriorated limbs and branches. In 2005, NPS staff installed a non-invasive limb cabling system in the upper crown to help stabilize the tree. Within the past year, the site staff has fenced off the lawn area directly beneath the tree branch canopy to protect visitors from falling debris. The Park Service continues to inspect the tree to monitor its condition and identify necessary corrective actions for minimizing hazards.

The final decision to remove the tree is based principally on its deteriorated condition and the associated risk of sudden structural failure. The NPS has consulted arborists and research scientists specializing in aged tree management. The consensus is that the tree poses an immediate hazard and should be removed.

Working with the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, Olmsted NHS staff has taken cuttings from the existing tree for propagation of genetic clones. When one reaches adequate size and vigor, it will be planted in the same place as the original. If attempts to replace the tree with this propagated material are unsuccessful, however, the NPS will

plant a disease-tolerant American elm variety instead. In either case, the NPS will employ techniques to promote the replacement elm's growth in a manner that approximates the aesthetic features of the original.

COMMEMORATION

The National Park Service is developing plans to commemorate the passing of this tree, including working with Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) to utilize the Olmsted Elm's wood for educational purposes. RISD students, after studying Frederick Law Olmsted and his design philosophy, also, the site's history and design, will produce furniture, sculptures, and other artwork that will be loaned to the site for public exhibition.

Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site is seeking input from the public on other ways to mark the passing of the tree. If you would like to share your thoughts or reminiscences, please join the discussion on "The Olmsted Elm" Facebook page, accessible from www.nps.gov/frla. Photographs and other ideas may be submitted to Park Ranger Alan Banks at Alan_Banks@nps.gov.

Top left: The elm after the 2010 removal of a cracked limb. Photo by Matt Griffing. Top right: A student drawing the elm during an education program in 2007. Photo by Joel Veak. Both photos courtesy of NPS/ Olmsted NHS.