FRIENDS OF Florham

Winter 1999/2000

Spring Lecture Series Scheduled

The Friends of Florham are pleased to announce the return of our well-received lecture series. In February and April 2000, two nationally renowned authors will present lectures dealing with architecture and landscaping in the Gilded Age. Both programs will take place in the newly restored Great Drawing Room (Lenfell Hall) of the "Florham" Mansion. The programs are as follows:

February 27, 2000: Charles Beveridge, Editor of the Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, American University. As editor of the Olmsted papers, Mr. Beveridge is a leading authority on America's most important nineteenth-century landscape architect. His talk, entitled "Florham and the Design Legacy of the Olmsted Firm," will address the place of Florham in the work of the Olmsteds in New Jersey as well as other Vanderbilt estates planned by the firm.

April 9, 2000: John Foreman, architectural historian and restoration consultant. Mr. Foreman has done extensive research on the Vanderbilt family with particular reference to their elegant homes as well as their opulent life styles. He is co-author of a book considered a definitive social and architectural history of the Gilded Age's most prominent family. The title of his talk is "The Vanderbilts and the Gilded Age."

Both Mr. Beveridge's recent book, *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape* (Rizzoli, 1996), and Mr. Foreman's book, *The Vanderbilts and the Gilded Age: Architectural Aspirations, 1879-1901* (St. Martin's, 1991), will be available at the lectures, each of which will begin at 2:30 p.m. Light refreshments will be served. Admission will be $3.00 for Friends of Florham members, $5.00 for non-members.

Message from FDU's President

It was with enthusiasm and commitment to excellence that I assumed the presidency of FDU on July first. Between then and now my wife and I have enjoyed meeting and learning about the university community. We both view the Mansion as a treasure, and are exactly aligned with the aims and goals of the Friends of Florham.

"We live life forward, but learn about it backwards" is a humorous but very accurate statement. We create the future from the foundation of our past. The Twombly-Vanderbilt Estate is a legacy left to us which we must cherish so it will continue to be part of a wonderful future.

Susan and I look forward to active participation with the Friends in the years to come.

Dr. Michael Adams

Dr. J. Michael Adams, FDU's new President

Fairleigh Dickinson University

Greetings from the President

This holiday season, the Friends of Florham are excited about the resumption of the lecture series that many of you have requested. As you will read in this newsletter, we have two outstanding experts scheduled to talk in February and in April, respectively, on subjects of special interest: landscaping and architecture. A fund-raising celebration is planned for later in the spring when the gardens will in full bloom and a plaque listing the Italian Garden donors will be "planted." We hope t see all of you at these gatherings, and PLEA remember us when you make your gift list. From all of us, Happy New Year.

Emma Joy Dana

The Fireback is Back - To Its Place in the Drawing Room Fireplace

To complete their restoration of the Great Drawing Room in the Florham Mansion, the Friends of Florham succeeded in locating a missing iron fireback which had adorned one of the two magnificent Renaissance fireplaces in the room. It had been sold in the 1955 auction when the contents of the Florham estate were sold off by the Twombly heirs. The Friends learned that it was in the possession of Susan Connell, of Newport, PA, whose parents, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Margetts, had acquired it at the auction. Mrs. Connell has generously donated this wonderful fireback to the Friends of Florham, and it is now once more restored to its original place in Lenfell Hall.

Susan Connell with the fireback she donated to the Friends' Great Drawing Room restoration project. The fireback was transported from Mrs. Connell's Pennsylvania home to "Florham" by Friends Trustee Richard C. Simon.

Several firebacks were listed in the 1955 Sotheby's auction catalog. This one is of majestic size, measuring 36" x 42" and weighing over 200 pounds. Moving this massive cast-iron piece proved to be a difficult job even for three men.

The decorative image cast into the face of the fireback contains an oak tree with a profuse display of oak leaves and acorns. A ribbon holds the title "The Royal Oak," surrounded by the initials *G* and *R* , presumably, Georgius Rex, the English king. The motif of the mighty oak was adopted by Commodore Vanderbilt's family as part of their coat of arms. Even America's pseudo-aristocracy desired heraldic emblems to display their exalted position in society. (A version of the Vanderbilt coat of arms containing the acorn and oak is shown in a photo elsewhere in this issue.) It is interesting to note that to this day Vanderbilt University, which was endowed by the Commodore in the 1870s, uses the oak leaf and acorn as its symbols.

A survey of the Mansion reveals there are eight fireplaces on the ground floor, three of which (two in the Drawing Room and one in the center hall) now have firebacks. The remaining five show evidence of having had firebacks in place at one time. The Friends of Florham, in their continuing efforts to restore the Mansion to its original state, would welcome learning the whereabouts of other pieces.

Richard C. Simon

A Few Words About Firebacks

A fireback is defined as "a thick panel of cast iron placed at the back of a hearth to protect the wall from the fire and reflect the heat into the room. Firebacks have been made since the sixteenth century and decorated in low relief with heraldry, Biblical or mythological scenes, or ornamental motifs." (*Dictionary of Decorative Arts)*

Firebacks were used in England, France, Holland, Flanders, and Central Europe for centuries. The American Colonial versions, typically copied from English pieces, have arched or vaulted tops, not unlike early gravestones. The early manufacturing process entailed the use of a carved wooden pattern which was pressed into damp sand on a foundry floor, and the resulting mold was flooded with molten iron run out directly from the furnace. Since the fireback was a relatively easy casting to produce, it was a common product from the early furnaces. Two eighteenth-century New Jersey furnaces are noted for their firebacks: the Aetna Furnace in Burlington County and the Oxford Furnace in Warren County. Morris County furnaces were also producing this product in the 1700s.

The intense heat generated by burning logs made the rear masonry of Colonial fireplaces vulnerable to damage and created a potential fire hazard. For the well-to-do household, the cast-iron fireback was the solution. Though antique examples survive, they are quite rare. After years of exposure to extreme heat, most of them cracked and were discarded or turned to other uses, such as serving as pathway blocks.

Fireback cast at Aetna Furnace, Burlington County, New Jersey, about 1775.

Richard C. Simon

Spring Gala Benefit Plans Underway

Mark your calendars, check out your dancing shoes, and get ready for the Friends' spring gala on Saturday, May 20, 2000. Chaired by Barbara Keefauver, Linda Meister, and Phyllis Conway, the benefit black-tie ball will feature dinner, dancing to the music of the Keyser Jazz Group in the beautifully restored Lenfell Hall, and cocktails on the terrace overlooking the Gardens. Proceeds from the spring ball will be directed toward the continuing restoration of the Mansion by the Friends. Look for further details in our next newsletter and plan to participate in what has become a Friends tradition.

Fortune's Children a Must Read

The fabled years of "Florham," the building of legendary mansions such as "The Breakers," and "Biltmore," and highly publicized marriages and divorces are only some of the stories chronicled by Arthur Vanderbilt II in his compelling study, *Fortune's Children: The Fall of the House of Vanderbilt*. At the heart of this tale of unparalleled wealth, excess, and ultimate decline, is the story of a legendary dynasty and its colorful members, a complex mix beginning with its difficult founder, the Commodore; the determined Alva, a world-class spender later turned suffragette; and Florence Vanderbilt Twombly of "Florham," New York, and Newport, who "led exactly the type of life of pomp and splendor the very rich were supposed to lead." *Fortune's Children* can be purchased at the FDU bookstore at a cost of $15, and Mr. Vanderbilt has generously offered to donate any royalties from sales of the book to the Friends.

The Vanderbilt Coat of Arms, with the oak leaves and acorns prominently in view.

Speaking of Books

Newsletter Editors Carol Bere and Walter Savage discuss the recently published biography, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and the Nineteenth Century*, by Witold Rybczynski, Professor of Urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania.

WS: Carol, did anything about Rybczynski's book genuinely surprise you?

CB: Definitely. I kept looking for some sort of reference to "Florham" and found no mention of the estate, of any of the Twomblys, or of anybody remotely associated with the creation of "Florham." McKim, Mead and White are referred to, but not in connection with the Twombly property.

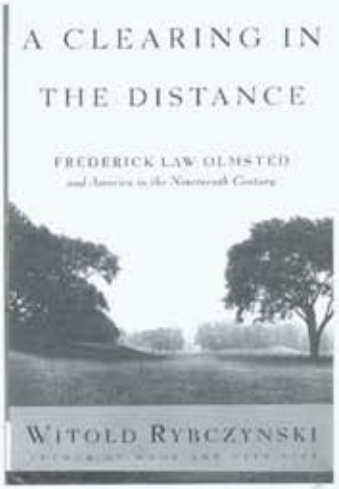
WS: Yes. That drew me up, too. Especially since the MM&W reference concerned Olmsted's meeting with McKim once when Olmsted was busy with a New Jersey project.

CB: And nothing is said about John Charles Olmsted and Warren Manning, supposedly, the two who carried out whatever Olmsted planned for "Florham." I found only one indirect and veiled reference to "Florham" or the Twomblys in the whole book. Somewhere, discussing Olmsted's work at George Washington Vanderbilt's "Biltmore," Rybczynski says that at the time Olmsted was advising three of Vanderbilt's sisters on improving their country estates. One of them must have been Mrs. Twombly.

WS: When I read that section, I recalled that Dick Simon once told me that the Olmsted papers in the Library of Congress include a sharply worded letter to Olmsted from Mr. Twombly chastising him rather severely for inveigling George Washington Vanderbilt into overspending on "Biltmore." The letter, apparently, led Twombly, more or less, to banish Olmsted from "Florham," and led Olmsted more than willingly to distance himself from the project he had been instrumental in getting started.

CB: I was equally surprised by what Rybczynski had to say about Olmsted as a pivotal nineteenth-century figure, by his presentation of Olmsted's multifaceted activities.

WS: You mean his importance as a writer, for instance? I knew little about that talent of his before reading the biography.



CB: The writing, for one thing. I had no idea that Olmsted had played such an important role in the discussion of the slavery issue and had written so widely and effectively about it.

WS: Or had been such a very influential journalist, editor, and publisher.

CB: Right. More than once I found myself half inclined to believe that Olmsted achieved his preeminence as a landscape architect because he was able to write such sensitive and persuasive planning documents about the projects he was discussing with clients.

WS: Even Olmsted's personal letters possess the power to move a reader. I am thinking in particular of the one he wrote in his last troubled years about his fear of being sent to an insane asylum. He sent it to one of his assistants just after his wife Mary and daughter Marion had taken him to Deer Island, Maine, when his increasing dementia had alarmed them.

CB: I remember that letter. It was painful to read.

WS: Yes, he wrote that "I hardly need say that I have been passing the bitterest week of my life, resentment gradually giving way to a realization of the truth. If I can, in any humble and limited way, be useful to you for a short time longer, it will be a great comfort to me. You cannot think how I have been dreading that it would be thought expedient that I should be sent to an institution. Any thing but that. My father was a director of an Insane Retreat, and first and last, having been professionally employed and behind the scenes in several, my dread of such places is intense. It was perhaps right to deceive me as I was deceived when brought here, but further dealings with me in that spirit with any deception will greatly aggravate my misfortune. Dealt with

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Speaking of Books (continued from page 4)

frankly and kindly I hope to be able to cultivate a spirit of Christian withdrawal."

CB: And that from a man who was at the time, as I remember Rybczynski's account of Mary Olmsted's reaction, so violent and in such a pitiful state that it made her and her daughter very nervous.

WS: Well, Olmsted, almost to the end, was capable of amazing accomplishments under the most trying circumstances.

CB: You are remembering Rybczynski's descriptions of Olmsted's incredible work schedule?

WS: It was amazing, wasn't it?

CB: Consistently. In 1884, the Olmsted firm was involved in at least sixteen private estate projects.

WS: I am sure that you recall Rybczynski's reminding us that Olmsted worked not only hard but with remarkable speed. Some sense of this remarkable energy is conveyed on page 288, describing the way Olmsted drew up the plan for the Parkside subdivision of Buffalo: "In two hectic days he had conceived this extraordinary *tour de force*, the outlines not of a park, but of an ambitious park system. If carried out, this master plan would govern the growth of Buffalo for years to come."

CB: When you look over the list of Olmsted landscape-architecture projects, estates, schools, even planned communities like the one in Buffalo, he still appears to be best known for his creation of parks. In fact, most people think of Olmsted in connection with Central Park (designed with Calvert Vaux), yet he designed other well-known parks such as the Emerald Necklace (created for the city of Boston), Prospect Park, and closer to home, Essex County Parks in New Jersey.

The concern for human beings that was at the heart of Olmsted's writings about slavery seemed to be a motivating factor in his park designs. In one of his proposals, he wrote that the purpose of parks is to provide "the feeling of relief experienced by those entering them, on escaping from the cramped, confined and controlling circumstances of the streets of the town; in other words, a sense of enlarged freedom is to all, at all times, the most certain and the most valuable gratification afforded by a park."

WS: People seem to have been at the heart of his several careers as journalist, administrator, designer. Rybczynski reminds us of his humanitarian work on the Civil War Sanitary Commission, his being a founding member of the American Social Science Association, and New York's Union League.

CB: In many ways, Rybczynski has written a traditional, well-researched biography that gives a real sense of the man and of his active participation in many of the major issues of nineteenth-century America. Yet he has created at the start of several chapters a number of vignettes that break this traditional flow. What do you think Rybczynski's purpose was in including what appear to be mini-docudramas?

WS: Those many sections, a dozen or so in which, rather like Woody Allen's Zelig, he returns in imagination to an earlier time and observes Olmsted up close? I think they are intended to permit us an instructive intimacy with Olmsted, his circle, and his days, and I think they do that.... And, since I read them at just about the time of the flap about Edmund Morris' *Dutch*, I was particularly grateful for Rybczynski's comment preceding the first of the fictional recreations of Olmsted walking through Central Park or spending time with his family, for instance.

CB: I marked that very place myself.

WS: You have it there? Read it back to me, please.

CB: Here it is: "Author's note: I have not taken liberties with Olmsted's biography; his words are his own, his opinions are those that he expressed to others, usually in letters. Yet I also want to see the world through his eyes. The vignette that follows - and there will be others - is based on material evidence; Olmsted was writing a letter on that night and it was stormy. His thoughts and feelings are, of course, imagined."

WS: So, in spite of its slighting "Florham," you would give high marks to Rybczynski's book?

CB: Absolutely.

WS: Well, we'll let your judgment be the last word here.

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Join the Friends of Florham. Participate directly in our efforts to preserve the architectural history of Florham, and support our informative program series. Your support will make a difference.

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Florham-Madison Campus
Madison, New Jersey 07940

Co-editors:
Carol Bere and
Walter Savage