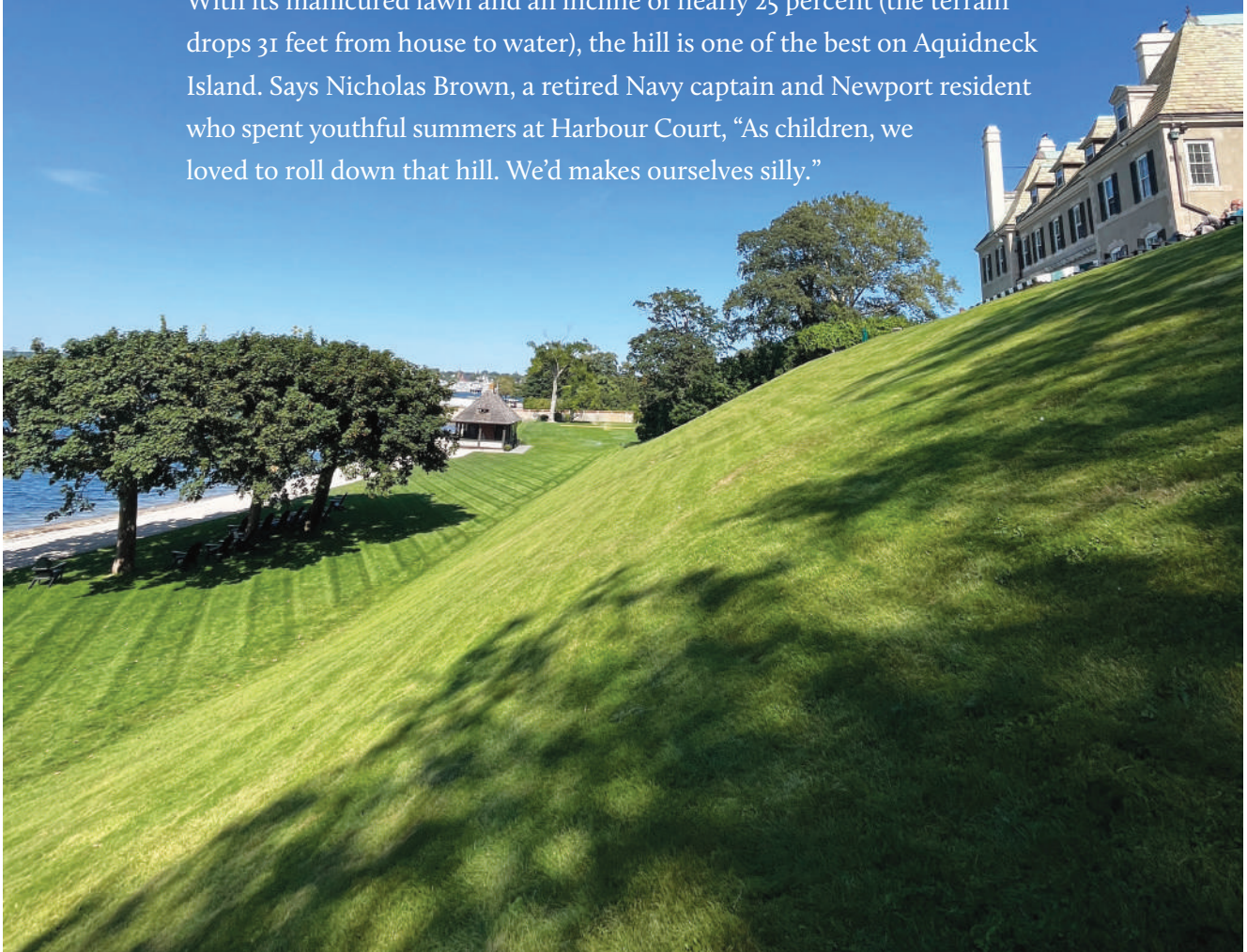


Harbour Court's Historic Landscape— and the Irresistible Hill

SAFEGUARDING THE HISTORIC LANDSCAPE DESIGNED IN THE EARLY 1900s BY THE FAMED
OLMSTED BROTHERS CONTINUES TO BE A PRIORITY OF THE CLUB TODAY.

By Jill Connors

Simple pleasures can be particularly sweet: Just ask anyone who has stood on the Sailors Terrace of Harbour Court—wowed by the impressive architecture of the house and the breathtaking view of the water—and given in to the impulse to slide down the 70-foot hill toward the harbor. With its manicured lawn and an incline of nearly 25 percent (the terrain drops 31 feet from house to water), the hill is one of the best on Aquidneck Island. Says Nicholas Brown, a retired Navy captain and Newport resident who spent youthful summers at Harbour Court, “As children, we loved to roll down that hill. We’d make ourselves silly.”



TRIXIE B. WADSON



OPPOSITE PAGE: A beautifully manicured lawn makes the steep slope from Harbour Court down to the water particularly inviting; it is thought that the hill was made steeper when Harbour Court was built in 1904-1906 to create a wider stretch of level land along the water.

LEFT: Landscape architect Harold Hill Blossom's 1920 plan for new formal gardens shows many trees already in place around the property.

Dizzy delights aside, the hill is one of the defining features of Harbour Court, whose 10-acre property today retains many of the landscape elements designed in the early 1900s by the Olmsted Brothers, noted landscape architects of the time. Natalie Bayard Dresser Brown, Harbour Court's original owner, hired the Brookline, Mass.-based Olmsted Brothers in 1913 to enhance the grounds of the property, which already was filled with mature trees, including many carefully preserved while the house was being built from 1904 to 1906. The brothers, John and Frederick Jr., were the sons of Frederick Law Olmsted, considered the father of American landscape architecture.

Although other landscape professionals worked on Harbour Court in the early years—the Manhattan firm of Armstrong and Joyner did the initial landscape work when the house was being built, and Harold Hill Blossom designed the exquisite Formal Garden in 1920—it is the work of the Olmsted Brothers in 1913 to 15 that most defines the historic landscape of Harbour Court.

A key principle the Olmsted Brothers had learned from their famous father was the positive impact a natural environment could create for the people who interacted with it every day,

and this effect was achieved by incorporating such things as winding pathways and abundant greenery.

"The Olmsteds were all about controlling vistas, and they placed trees at Harbour Court in a way that meant you would approach the house along a winding drive and see trees first, then arrive at the house and see the vista to the harbor," says preservation architect Martha Werenfels, FAIA, senior principal at DBVW Architects, in Providence, R.I.

The Olmsteds were also all about lushness: They created a heavily landscaped effect with hundreds of trees—including cedar, birch, pine, oaks, cherry and more—across the grounds to create, as Werenfels describes, "lots of moments where you discover special places." Much of that lushness remains today, even allowing for the natural attrition of trees aging and coming down.

"Overall, the landscape of Harbour Court has changed very little over the years, with the biggest change being the number of larger trees that existed," says Werenfels, who notes the challenge of maintaining a historic landscape while keeping it from getting overgrown. "Today, you still have that winding driveway approach, but there are fewer trees



LEFT: A close-up of the planting list specified by the Olmsted Brothers in 1914 for the stone steps designed by the Olmsted approach they took.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Three images dating from September 1916 show the lush landscape designed by the Olmsted Brothers. Clockwise from left: abundant plantings already in place along the stone steps; the lawn looking east from Harbour Court's terrace with mature trees defining views of the harbor; the steep hill giving the house its commanding view of the water.

controlling where you see the water and where you don't."

Jim Boyd, general manager of Harbour Court, knows that maintaining the historic landscape takes diligence. "We safeguard the tree inventory and replace trees that we lose, but given that so many of the trees were planted in the same time span, it is a challenge each year," says Boyd, who replaces trees either with a sapling or large tree.

Another key feature of Harbour Court's historic landscape are the stone steps that the Olmsted Brothers designed in 1914, located at the northeast edge of the house and winding down toward the waterfront. Along these steps, the firm specified the placement of more than 100 plants to create the feeling of natural and informal surroundings as a person went up and down or paused along the way. They also took great care in every aspect of building of the steps, notes Werenfels, who described the work in an article for *Rhode Island History*:

"The correspondence indicates that local stone was dug up from various sites in Newport to complete this work, and that careful attention was paid to the type of grass that was planted between the steps. The firm ordered special grass seed, which was then grown as sod by one of the contractors, who transplanted it to the steps at Harbour Court at just the right time in the growing season. Such painstaking attention to detail enabled the firm to achieve the kind of seemingly informal and natural effects for which it was so highly regarded."

As with the overall historic landscape at Harbour Court, the Olmsted stone steps remain intact. "The steps themselves have not been modified much, although some of the plantings may have been modified," says Werenfels. The steps terminate very near the Boathouse, which was already in place as a playhouse when the Olmsteds designed the steps, and they would have considered the relationship from steps to structure.



The upcoming project this winter to rebuild the Seawall involves moving the Boathouse slightly. “We are not touching the steps when moving the Boathouse, and we are developing the landscape design around the relocated Boathouse to respond to the existing historic steps,” says Werenfels.

The natural and informal principles that the Olmsted Brothers followed in their landscape architecture—versus the more formal Beaux Arts approaches that were in vogue at the time—continue to augment the splendid property of Harbour Court. “They were starting with a gorgeous piece of property, one with so much drama from the site and slope and view north to the harbor,” says Werenfels.

Documents from the time the Olmsted Brothers worked on the property show that the steep hill from the house down to the waterfront was already in place, although

photographs from the property in the late 1800s—before Harbour Court was built—indicate a much gentler slope.

So how did the steep hill so irresistible for rolling come to be? The best guess is it happened during the construction of Harbour Court, when a decision must have been made to remove the more gentle terracing of the 1800s and create a steeper effect, possibly to create more level ground at the waterfront. Whatever the intent, the change took the slope from bucolic to commanding—and, best of all in some opinions, made for one heck of a roll. 🏴‍☠️



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