

Purpose: Based on statements contained in the GMP/EIS (1995) to the effect that the new building site for Hamilton Grange (HAGR) in St. Nicholas Park would be modified evoke the period of Hamilton's residence there, I was tasked with a reconnaissance of the status of existing landscape research documenting the original building site and environs formerly centered at the intersection of 143rd Street and Convent Avenue. The primary question to be answered by this reconnaissance is the potential for additional research to add significantly to what is known of the Grange landscape, its characteristics and features during 1800-1804.

On September 4th and 5th I traveled to NYC to review materials in park files. During my visit, in addition to assessing the potential value of new landscape research, I hoped to discover existing documentation related to the layout and composition of walks and drives, fences, plantings and the organization of outdoor space immediately surrounding the dwelling on its original site that might be helpful in interpreting site-specific landscape conditions of the early nineteenth century.

Background: (*Excerpted from Final GMP/EIS*) Public Law 87-438 (27 April 1962) authorized the establishment of the Hamilton Grange National Monument in NYC on lands which have been donated and which are “sufficient to assure the relocation of the Grange and administration and interpretation of the national memorial.”

Hamilton Grange is the only home ever owned by Alexander Hamilton, one of our nation's founding fathers, Revolutionary War leader, coauthor of the *Federalist Papers*, signatory of the Constitution, first secretary of the treasury, and founder of the *New York Post* and the Bank of New York. The house, a three-bay, two-story building was constructed in the symmetrical Federal style of architecture and once featured elegant porches on all sides. The building was completed in February 1803 based on a design by John Macomb Jr., a prominent architect of the time. Following Hamilton's untimely death in 1804, the house was occupied by his widow and children at least part of each year until 1833. After 1833 the Grange was used as a summer home by several successive New York families until 1879 when the property and house were acquired by a merchant and real estate investor. The tract of land was divided into 300 building lots, and the rectilinear street system was extended north. When the grid for 143rd Street was established, it was clear that the street would pass very close to the structure and that the Grange would have to be moved or otherwise be torn down. In 1889, as the population of New York City moved northward, the downtown St. Luke's Episcopal Church was looking for a new uptown site. The rector of the church, upon seeing the large dwelling, contacted the developer and the owner who agreed to donate the house and move it approximately 350 feet south to its current site at 287 Convent Avenue. The Grange then functioned as a temporary chapel while the new stone church was built on the adjoining lot. An apartment building was later built on the opposite adjoining lots. In 1924 the Grange was purchased from the church by the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society to Preserve the Grange as a public monument. The society maintained and operated it as a museum until 1964 when it was accepted by the U.S. government for administration by the National Park Service. In 1960 Hamilton Grange was designated as a national historic landmark in commemoration of Alexander Hamilton. In 1962 the Grange was authorized as a national memorial within the National Park Service. It is also a contributing resource to the architecturally significant Hamilton Heights Historic District, which surrounds the house. New legislation in 1988 amended the earlier legislation, established a boundary provided for acquisition of the land on which the house sits, and required the preparation of a General Management Plan (GMP) which was completed in 1995. Among four alternatives presented by the GMP, the preferred alternative recommends that the Grange be relocated across 141st Street

to a portion of St. Nicholas Park and be furthermore restored to the greatest degree possible, to its interior and exterior appearance during Hamilton's residency. The relocation of the building to St. Nicholas park was first proposed by the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society in 1912.

According to the GMP/EIS, the new site in St. Nicholas Park would be fully developed as an appropriate setting for the memorial. Landscaping evocative of Hamilton's period would be installed. Thirteen sweet gum trees commemorating the original colonies and perhaps propagated from trees at Mount Vernon, would be planted near the house in a grove as Hamilton had once planted them on the original building site. About six existing mature trees would have to be removed from St. Nicholas Park to allow for the house relocation, but additional trees would be planted to ensure that those trees lost are replaced. During the design process, landscape plans would be developed to soften the intrusion of Steinman Hall (part of City College of New York), a nine-story structure adjacent to the new Grange site.

St. Nicholas Park occupies a tract reserved as park land during the urban development of New York City. Begun in 1903, this linear park extends between 128th and 141st Streets, and is one of three parks in upper Manhattan designed by Samuel Parsons, Jr., a landscape architectural protégé of Calvert Vaux's and a pioneer of American landscape design in his own right. Several landscape elements have been added to St. Nicholas Park that were not part of Parson's original design. These include playgrounds, ball courts, and a comfort station. During the mid-1940 extensive regrading and replanting were accomplished throughout the park. In the 1960's, the City College of New York constructed large nine-story building on the corner of 141st and Convent Avenue where a two and one-half story stone building had previously stood. In 1994 the New York SHPO determined St. Nicholas Park ineligible for the National Register of Historic Places in correspondence containing the following language:

"Based on the materials provided to us by your office and a site visit by staff, it is our opinion that the park does not possess integrity and therefore is not eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places... Subsequent developments along the edges of the park, as well as the loss of some of the features within the park has caused the overall denigration of the park. Few major elements and features of the original design remain intact and the integrity of the original design intent of Parsons is questionable because of the numerous additions to the park. Therefore we conclude that the overall integrity of the park is so marginal that the property is not eligible for the National Register listing... While the park may not be eligible for listing, it is nonetheless an important amenity to the Harlem community, and we would encourage careful attention be paid to the remaining important features of the park in planning the move of the Hamilton Grange" (Gillespie to Rust 9/21/94).

Findings: During my brief visit to Federal Hall, I reviewed the parks collection of original chronological research card file, historic structure reports, as well as photographs, plans and drawings. Much of the original research was completed in preparation of the Historical Data Section of the HSR. Research was conducted principally in the Library of Congress under a research grant from the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, in the New York Public Library, and at the New York Historical Society. Other sources investigated by the HSR project included: Hamilton Period: Hamilton Cash Books (LC), Schuyler Family Papers (NYPL), Hamilton Estate Period: including advertisements of the estate found in NYC newspapers, (Mercury Advertiser, Dec. 1805 and Jan. 1806), Legal documents (Bank of New York). Period of Use as Ward Family Summer Home (1845-1876): including diary entries of the Ward family. Period of Ownership by William Deforest (c.1879-1888). Sources unsearched by the HSR effort were the various archival collections and materials of the Ward (Julia Ward

Howe) family of Rhode Island and New York, which owned the property after its divestment by the Hamilton family.

My investigation suggests that additional research is likely to yield little information beyond what is already understood of the Hamilton Grange landscape c. 1804. To be of value, a new program of research would have to be at least as extensive as that undertaken by Alfred Mongin during the 1960s which occupied years of his professional career. Additional new research may obtain and make available new facts and insights into the landscape, and this would indeed be valuable outside the schedule of the pending line-item construction project, yet this new research is likely to merely add additional fragments to our understanding of the original site rather than complete it, or even to make possible the preparation of a reasonably accurate period site plan c. 1804. New research with findings presented in the form of a cultural landscape report for the original house site would not likely offer great enough detail to guide landscape treatment at the new site in St. Nicholas Park according to the high standards of the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.

Currently, no site plans or sketches have been located through previous research efforts that document landscape conditions during Hamilton's residency on what was then a thirty-two-acre rural property. In fact, architect John Macomb Jr., drawings for the building itself have not been located, and the architectural organization of the building interior remains somewhat conjectural. Hamilton's personal correspondence provide some insight into the collection of landscape elements, and general landscape character, however as Alfred Mogen, co-author of the Historic Structure Report wrote: "...the original landscaping of the Grange is discernable only in a general way from the type of accounts presented above, and from views of the grounds as they appear in the late 19th-century photographs" (HSR pg 46).

Only two landscape characteristics are well documented from Hamilton's time. These were once found to the front, or south-west façade, of the dwelling. One of these features was a closely spaced clump of trees said to be planted in honor of the thirteen original states. The clump of trees was comprised wholly of sweet gum or *Liquidambar styraciflua*. Traditional accounts have Hamilton himself planting these trees, but none of the accounts, or the trees representation of the thirteen original states, can be linked to primary sources. Nevertheless, the existence of the trees is a fact that is well documented on later maps and photographs of the property. The second of the two well documented features was a circular flower garden at the center of a circular drive terminating at the front entrance stoop (HSR p45). A drawing in Hamilton's own hand survives for the circular flower garden and is published in *The Intimate Life of Alexander Hamilton* by Allan McLane Hamilton. (Scribner 1910) and has been speculated to have been inspired by Hamilton's association with Dr. David Hosack, Hamilton's doctor and friend, who had founded the Elgin Botanical Garden on the current site of Rockefeller Center. Hamilton was thought to have sometimes stopped by the botanical garden on his way to and from his professional offices in lower Manhattan. Hamilton's drawing of the circular garden is accompanied by the following handwritten annotation: "If it can be done in time, I should be glad a space could be prepared in the center of the flower garden for planting a few tulips, lilies, hyacinths. The space should be a circle of which the diameter is eighteen feet; and there should be nine of each sort of flowers; but the Gardener will do well to consult as to the season. They may be arranged thus: Wild roses around the outside of the flower garden with laurel at foot. If practicable in time I should be glad some laurel should be planted along the edge of the shrubbery and round the clump of trees near the house; also sweet briars and dogwood. A few dogwood trees not large, scattered along the margin of the grove would be very pleasant, but the fruit trees there must be first removed and advanced in front. These labors, however, must not interfere with the hot bed" ("The Intimate Life..." p349).

Recommendations: Based on the findings of my recent trip, I recommend against pursuing a new program of research devoted solely to uncovering additional landscape details of the original house site that is closely tied to the scheduled milestones of the pending line-item construction project. While such a program of continuing research might be a worthwhile long-term endeavor, such a research effort is likely to yield only additional fragmentary information, or result in a repackaging of what is already understood within the constraints of the project schedule. A fairly complete documentation of the original landscape might be completed through additional research for the years just prior to the building's relocation in the late 1880's but this would not satisfy the goals of the 1995 GMP/EIS, that the landscape should evoke Hamilton's residency.

As an alternative to a program of new research, I suggest that staff from the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, be made available to participate in meetings and discussions leading to a new site plan for the Grange within St. Nicholas park. The experience and training of historical landscape architects at the Olmsted Center would be a helpful addition to the project team as it pursues the ambitious task of providing an appropriate setting for the historic building while heeding the advice of the New York SHPO to pay careful attention to the remaining important features of the park.

As a result of my research trip I would offer the following points to consider as the team involved with the line-item construction program begins to develop a site plan for the relocated building:

1. The clump of thirteen Sweetgum trees shown on the 1994 Conceptual Site Plan in the GMP/EIS appears to be on the wrong side of the building. Documentation shows that the clump of trees was located to the south-east of the house, not the north-west as shown.
2. The composition of walks and drives would have been of sand and stone bound together with an admixture of clay. This according to Hamilton's own accounts and in letters to his wife. Hamilton had not lived in his new dwelling long enough before his death to greatly embellish his grounds with fine pavements and edgings.
3. The grounds surrounding the mansion would have been covered with scythe cut turf, containing a significant amount of red clover, as Hamilton himself expressed an admiration for red clover in correspondence with Peters. The length of the turf would have typically been longer, perhaps as long as between 5"-10," an entirely different character of turf than that typically found in municipal parks.
4. There is no information suggesting that there was a "foundation planting," during Hamilton's residency. Such plantings only became popular later during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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