
Sudbrook—Baltimore's First Olmsted Community

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Sudbrook Park, located in the Pikesville section of Baltimore County, was designed in 1889 by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and is his only residential design in Maryland. Sudbrook Park is one of only three surviving suburban villages in the country designed by the elder Olmsted and the predecessor of later Olmsted firm Baltimore-area suburban designs such as Roland Park, Guilford, and Homeland.

Sudbrook's connection with Olmsted dates from 1876. At that time, James Howard McHenry, a gentleman farmer from a distinguished Maryland family, contacted Olmsted to design a suburban village on McHenry's 850-acre "Sudbrook" estate — through which the Western Maryland Railroad had recently run its track when extending its line into Baltimore. The few extant letters and journal entries indicate that McHenry and Olmsted corresponded for at least a few months and possibly through 1878 regarding the project, but it is unknown whether a plan materialized at that time. Unfortunately, McHenry's long-standing interest in developing a suburban community on his Sudbrook estate did not reach fulfillment before his death in 1888.

In 1889, a group of Boston and Philadelphia investors formed the Sudbrook Company, whose principals started negotiations with the McHenry executors to purchase a portion of McHenry's estate, and also began working with Olmsted, Sr., assisted by his adopted son John Charles Olmsted, to design a suburban community. One of the first planning issues involved a determination of boundaries. The Olmsteds urged the Company to purchase more upland property for the development, but the McHenry executors balked at this. An eventual compromise gave the Company some additional upland in conjunction with its agreement to take some of the low-lying area near the Gwynns Falls. The property that was purchased varied from 395-feet to almost 500-feet above tidewater. Respecting the natural topography of the land, Olmsted platted five main curvilinear roads (Sudbrook, Howard, Cliveden, Winsor and McHenry) to take advantage of existing undulations in surface. He also set aside Cliveden Green, 8.5 acres near the pinnacle, as a permanent open space playground area, hoping to preserve the view.

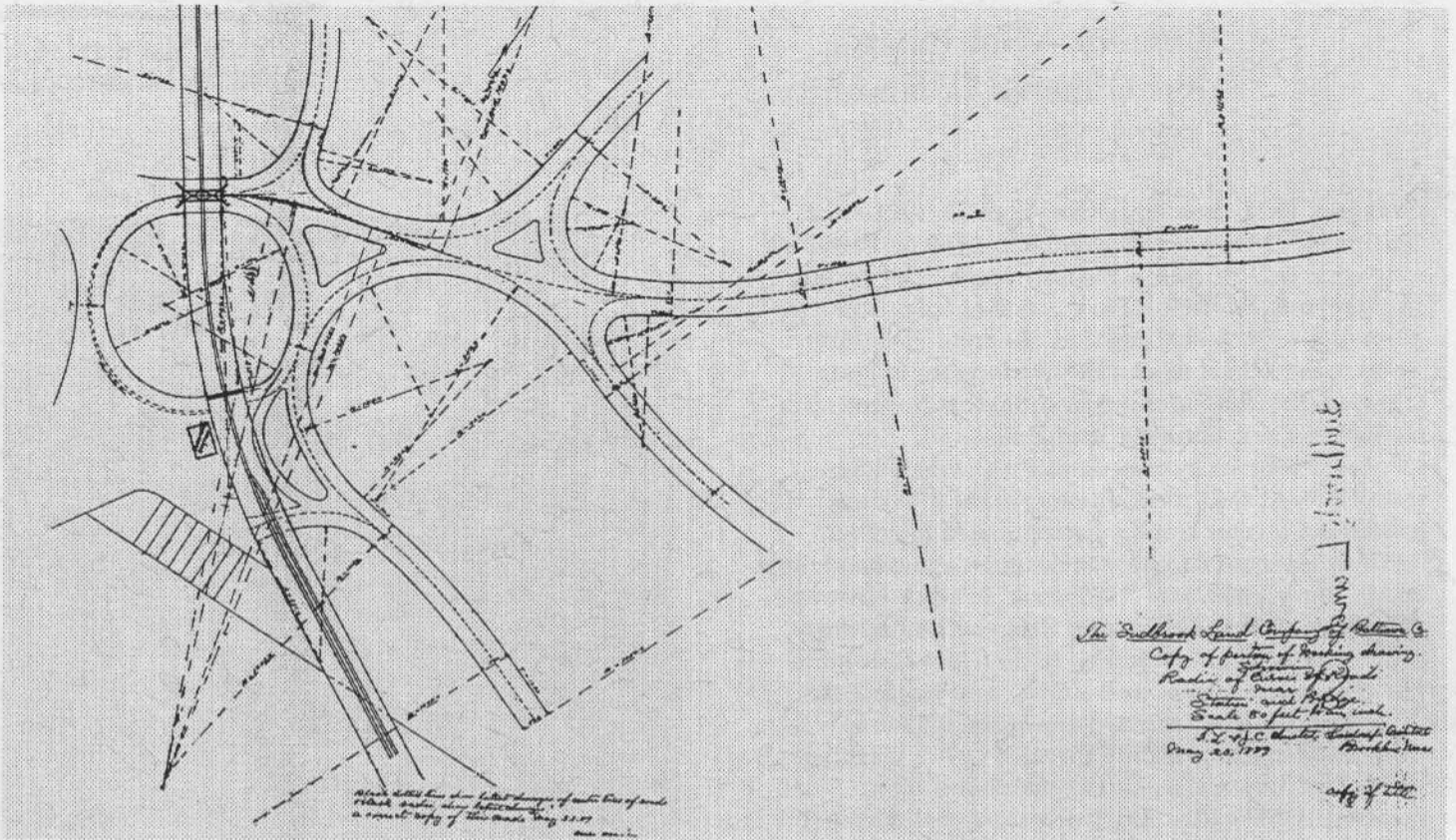
Further, Frederick Law Olmsted suggested locating a proposed boarding house on an open land triangle adjacent to the playground, as opposed to siting it in the more wooded area near the proposed



Sudbrook Park Residence

train station. When Baltimore attorney Hugh Bond, Jr., the Company President, protested that such a location would require too far a walk in the sun during the hot summer months, Olmsted pointed out that "so far as walking in the sun is concerned, the plan is to plant trees along the road so that there need be little of the distance without shade" and suggested the possibility of two boarding houses, one near the proposed station and one on the open land. Ultimately, the Company decided to locate the boarding house near the station and to reserve the triangle for a church or other public building. Two bridges, one for pedestrians and another for carriages, were located at the entranceway area. For the most part, houses were to be on parcels of about an acre, although Olmsted purposely included smaller lots — another novel concept at the time.

The Sudbrook Company was anxious to begin the sale of lots and pushed the Olmsteds to quickly complete a plan or send partial drawings. By August 1889, the Company had Olmsted's "General Plan for Sudbrook," an artistic interlooping of curvilinear roads woven into a comprehensive design on 204-acres of McHenry's estate. As he had done in Riverside, Chicago, Olmsted sought to create a naturalistic "respite for the spirit" in Sudbrook. In addition to his



Radii of Curves of Roads Near Station and Bridge, F.L. and J.C. Olmsted, Landscape Architects, May 23, 1889

trademark curvilinear roads — a concept so novel that the Sudbrook Company had difficulty finding a surveyor who could implement them — Olmsted incorporated six other design principles in his plan for Sudbrook: 1) a distinct entranceway; 2) open green-spaces to serve as public grounds for informal gatherings; 3) an abundance of trees and other vegetation to create a naturalistic effect; 4) a mixture of both larger and smaller sized lots within the community; 5) the separation of distracting elements (such as the commuter train) using artful design and natural barriers; and 6) innovative and extensive deed restrictions to protect the master plan, establish sanitary requirements and maintain the residential character of the community.

Although Olmsted designed Sudbrook as a year-round suburban village and the Sudbrook Company expected sales to be immediate and plentiful, Baltimoreans were slow to accept the idea of residing permanently eight miles from the city, a considerable distance at that time. From its opening in 1890 — with a hotel, train station, water tower and nine cottages built to entice potential purchasers — sales never materialized as anticipated. While the Company always had a waiting list of prominent Baltimoreans eager to rent from May through October, its inability

to sell a substantial number of lots, combined with the popularity of the seasonal hotel, led to Sudbrook Park's early reputation as a "summer community."

The Sudbrook Company went out of business around 1910, having developed about twenty percent of the community's 204-acres. The hotel burned in 1926. New development began in 1939 and continued until about 1954, subdividing many of the blocks and lots laid out by Olmsted, as well as the spaces reserved for a church and playground, to accommodate hundreds of neo-colonial brick homes. Despite changes, the developers emulated Olmsted's plan and house setbacks, retaining much of the intended ambiance.

Sudbrook has weathered many changes since it was designed as an innovative "suburban village" by America's first and foremost landscape architect — including those precipitated by a threatened expressway and the transit line's construction. Thanks to Olmsted's plan and the soundness of his design principles, Sudbrook Park has remained a cohesive community in the true sense of the word and a "respite for the spirit," as important now as it was 107 years ago.

—Melanie Anson, *Sudbrook Park, Inc.*

→ For additional information about the **Olmsted** legacy in Maryland, see the FMOPL booth in the lobby of the St. Charles Church School in Sudbrook.