

Celebrating a suburban genius

BY JEFF STIMPSON

Frederick Law Olmsted was more than just another neighborhood planner.

"He was really an artist," says Catherine Mahan, landscape architect and president of the Mt. Washington-based firm Mahan Rykiel Associates. "Now so many of his ideas are so commonplace, we think what's all the fuss about."

That fuss will be the center of two events in the next couple of weeks honoring Olmsted, designer of Pikesville's Sudbrook Park and such other national landmarks as Manhattan's Central Park, Chicago's Riverside community, and several national parks.

The symposium "Sudbrook and the Olmsted Tradition of Community Design in the Baltimore Area" will be at the Maryland Historical Society on Sunday, Nov. 10.

One of the symposium speakers, Mahan will examine Sudbrook as Olmsted's premier residential community in Maryland, and look at the principals behind the 1889 design.

This event is co-sponsored by Sudbrook Park Inc., The Maryland Historical Society, The Baltimore County Historical Trust, and Friends of Maryland's Olmsted Parks and Landscapes.

The latter will also sponsor a two-hour tour of Sudbrook Park on Saturday, Nov. 16.

The symposium kicks off an exhibit and the publishing of two books on Sudbrook Park, both spurred by recent grants.

New interest in Olmsted, however, has been spurred by America's new passion for suburbs.

"The sprawling American suburban development — it's really a disaster — is not the way suburban development was meant to be," notes Matthew Mosca, board member of Friends of Olmsted.

"Sudbrook Park is a superb example of what suburban development in the 19th Century was meant to be," he adds.

Olmsted — dubbed the founder of landscape architecture in post-Civil War America — designed

three residential communities that still stand. Sudbrook Park remains the local example of how the genius worked his curved streets, public greenery, set-back homes, and pure sight lines. Olmsted's eye on the landscape always favored tucking in a street, rather than inflicting a thoroughfare.

Before the native of Hartford, Conn., died in 1903, he had stamped 20th-century residential development coast-to-coast with his use of such details as greenways and traffic flow.

"The plans for Central Park were the first time pedestrian traffic and vehicular traffic were separated," Mahan says. "It's impossible to go anywhere in this country and not see his fingerprints."

His influence also spread to less-popular points of suburban living. Namely, restrictions.

In Sudbrook, it was no pigs in yards. No more than two horses per family. No high hedges. The Gilded Age equivalent of no Christmas lights and no blue paint on the garage door.

But even Olmsted's design couldn't stem changes nearby. When the road near the one-lane bridge into the neighborhood was widened, Mahan notes, trees precious to the original plan were scraped away.

"People will change something, and it will really have an effect on the overall character," she says.

Maybe Baltimore County has figured out it has history in its lap. Early last month, the County Council recently enacted a resolution to form a community action plan and task force for Sudbrook Park. Olmsted would be proud of such vision.

The Nov. 10 symposium is free, and will be at the Maryland Historical Society, 201 W. Monument St., from 2 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. Reception follows. Call 685-3750.

For information on the Sudbrook tour of Nov. 16, call Janet Felsten at 235-3378. The tour, which begins at 10 a.m., may be limited. Cost is \$7 for Friends members, \$10 for non-members.



PHOTO COURTESY STEWART MCLEAN

The work of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted is being featured in a tour of Sudbrook Park on Nov. 16 and an exhibit at the Maryland Historical Society now through Nov. 17. This home, in the 500 block of Sudbrook Road — shown here in this 1897 photo and picturing the owners, the Samuel Kemp Merrick family — is featured on the tour. Tour information, call 235-3378. Exhibit, 685-3750.