

State Historic Preservation Office

CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY – LANDSCAPES * OLMSTED PROJECT COVER SHEET

Please submit completed form to: Architectural Survey Coordinator State Historic Preservation Office, Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development 450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 5, Hartford, CT 06103

I	PROPERTY NAME (Current/Historic)							
D E N	Institute of Living / Connecticut Retreat for the Insane, Hartford Retreat for the Insane, Hartford Insane Asylum, Retreat Park							
T I F	COUNTY	TOWN/CITY	VILLAGE					
	Hartford	Hartford						
Т	JOB NUMBER							
C A	Primary: 12015 Related Job Numbers:							
Т	Landscape Type							
0	Park, Parkway, Recreation Area. Scenic Reservation							
Ν	City/Regional Plan, Improvement Project							
	\Box Subdivision, Suburban Community							
□ College/School Campus								
	⊠ Grounds of Residential Institution							
□ Grounds of Public Building								
	□ Cemetery / Burial Lot / Memorial / Monu	morial / Monument						
	\Box Grounds of Commercial / Industrial Build	ling						
	Country Club / Resort, Hotel, Club							
	□ Grounds of Church							
□ Arboretum, Garden								
	 Exhibition, Fair Miscellaneous 							
	DATE OF ORIGINAL PROJECT: 1860							
	SUBSEQUENT PROJECTS: 1887							



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T	DESIGNER(S) (primary)		
	⊠ Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.		
	□ John Charles Olmsted		
	Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.		
	\Box Other firm member(s):		
	□ Other notes:		
 Other Designers (prior to or following Olmsted project): Jacob Weidenmann Repositories consulted with source materials 			
	⊠ Library of Congress		
	⊠ Olmsted Online (OlmstedOnline.org)		
	National Archives and Record Administration		
	Connecticut State Library		
	Hartford History Center		
	⊠ Other: Connecticut ASLA, <i>The Olmsted Legacy Trail</i>		

Observations regarding features characteristic of Olmsted firm design

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., Calvert, Vaux, and Jacob Weidenmann were all involved in the design of the grounds for the Connecticut Retreat for the Insane. The facility, which was later known as the Hartford Retreat for the Insane, and Hartford Insane Asylum, is today known as the Institute of Living. Olmsted's work led to the establishment of Retreat Park, a picturesque open green space located east of and behind the concentration of hospital and administrative buildings that edge Washington Street. Many of the trees within the green are mature and may date to the mid to late nineteenth century. The best drawing available of the property is attributed to Jacob Weidenmann. Review of the drawing, featured in Rudy Favretti's book *Jacob Weidenmann, pioneer landscape architect*, and correspondence records indicates that the firm's proposals for Retreat Park included the design of a road and path network that followed gently curving routes of passage throughout the property, entrances at three locations from adjacent public roads, and an expansive central green space punctuated by tree plantings and small garden areas. The green space was integral to Olmsted's suggestion that green space be provided for patients and their caregivers for the healing qualities it might afford.



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Today, the road system and the way in which it frames the large central green space survive on the site from the Olmsted, Vaux, and Weidenmann design of 1861. Also present are several large mature trees representing a variety of species that were likely planted in the 1860s and later based on the firm's plans. New buildings, parking areas, and garden spaces have been added over the years. The green space was adapted for use as a golf course for a period, but developments associated with this use are no longer extant, with the exception of a golf house. Some later developments, such as the addition of parking in the eastern portion of the property, have reduced the overall area of the green. However, the property continues to convey many aspects of the original design and retains a high degree of integrity. The landscape of the Institute of Living continues to reflect the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and is an important work of landscape architecture.

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D I	PROPERTY NAME (Current/Historic) Institute of Living / Connecticut Retreat for the Insane, Hartford Retreat for the Insane, Retreat Park, Hartford									
Ē	Insane Asylum (Job #12015)									
N	COUNTY	TOWN/CITY		VILLAGE						
Т	Hartford	Hartford								
I		STREET AND NUMBER (and/or location)								
F										
I C	OWNER(S) ☐ PRIVATE ☐ MUNICIPAL ⊠ STATE ☐ FEDERAL ☐ TRIBAL ☐ EASEMENT Hartford Hospital									
A T	LAT/LONG COORDINATES I Center Point Polygon 41.749905,									
I O	PARCEL INFORMATION PID(s): 228552069 MBLU(s): 208001001									
N	USE (Present) Hospital facility		<i>(Historic)</i> Hospital facility							
	SURVEY TYPE Reconnaissance-Level Intensive-Level									
D E S C R	LANDSCAPE TYPE (Check all that apply)									
l P	DATE OR PERIOD (Include source of date) 1860;1887 (Olmsted Research Guide Online)									
T I O	DESIGNERS (Entities that created, designed, constructed, or shaped the landscape) Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, Jacob Weidenmann									
N	DESIGN SCOPE (For designed landscapes, explain what work was commissioned.) The grounds of a residential hospital institution to include circulation systems, entrances into the property, open space design, paths, plantings, and grading									
	LOCATION OF DRAWINGS/IMAGES/SOURCE MATERIAL Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site; Library of Congress; Rudy J. Favretti, Jacob Weidenmann, pioneer landscape architect (2007); Connecticut ASLA, The Olmsted Legacy Trail.									
	VISUAL ASSESSMENT SUMMARY (Check boxes for the qualities that are key features of this landscape. If attaching descriptive narrative, consider these categories.)									
	 ☑ Layout & Spatial Relationships ☑ Circulation ☑ Topography ☑ Plantings/Vegetation ☑ Views & Vistas □ Boundaries 		 □ Draina ⊠ Buildin ⊠ Recrea □ Other: 	ngs/Structures/Objects ational Space						

Forms containing sensitive Information may be withheld from public disclosure (CGS 1-210)

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C O	EXISTING CONDITION							
N D I T I O N	Changes: Numerous buildings have been added and portions of the green adapted for parking POTENTIAL THREATS □ None Known □ Infrastructure Improvements ⊠ Onsite Development □ Adjacent Development □ Vandalism □ Overuse ⊠ Deferred Maintenance □ Invasive Vegetation □ Environmental – specify: □ Other – specify:							
E N	SETTING (One sentence description) The facility is located near downtown Hartford							
V I R	VEGETATION Maintained Open Land Natural Open Land Woodland/Forest Wetland Specimen Plants Other – specify: SLOPE Level/Nearly Level Moderate Slope Elevation (ASML): 100' CONNECTICUT PHYSIOGRAPHIC PROVINCE (Eco-Region) Northwest Highlands Western Uplands Western Coastal Slope Eastern Coastal Slope Eastern Uplands Soil Description: Site composed of urban soils, Ludlow silt loam, and Wethersfield loam							
O N								
M E N T								
H I S T O R Y	SUMMARY (Provide a brief overview in this space. More detailed narrative can be attached.)In 1860, Superintendent of the Hartford Retreat for the Insane engaged Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and Calvert Vaux to prepare plans to improve the grounds, requesting that the designers "drain and grade the ground, add to our present plantations of trees and flowering shrubs, and to open a carriage road at a more suitable distance from the building than the present one, to which the public at certain times and under suitable restrictions, may have access." Plans called for curvilinear roads and walks, trees, and a large green.NATIONAL REGISTER RECOMMENDATIONEntered by: Liz Sargent HLA \boxtimes Recommended Eligible (Criterion \boxtimes A \square B \boxtimes C \square D) \square Not Eligible							
R	Explanation: The property remains an important example of the work of the Olmsted and Vaux firm NR Listed: District-Contributing District-Non-Contributing Individual Insufficient Documentation NAME ORGANIZATION DATE							
Е	Liz Sargent and Maeve Corcoran	Red Bridge	-	December 2021				
P O R T E D B Y	ADDRESS 2100 Green Street, San Francisco, California 94123							
	PHOTOGRAPHER Liz Sargent		DATE September 17, 2021	 Permission to use photographs (public domain) 				
	SURVEY METHOD							

ATTACHMENTS (Include the following items in the PDF)

 \boxtimes Location Map \boxtimes Site Map \boxtimes Photographs with captions \boxtimes Historic Images (if applicable) \boxtimes Narrative Description of Property \boxtimes Historical Narrative of Property \boxtimes References

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CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford

DESCRIPTION (Visual Assessment Summary)

Layout & Spatial Relationships: The Institute of Living occupies a large parcel edged to the north by Washington Street, to the east by Retreat Avenue and Essex Street, to the south by Maple Avenue, and to the west by Barnard Street. The facility features a large cluster of hospital and administrative facilities located within a linear band grouped near Washington Street. Additional facilities are located to the west and along the southern margin of the property. Large parking areas are found in the eastern part of the property. The central part of the complex is a large open green punctuated by tree and shrub plantings. Many of the trees are mature examples of unusual species. An access road encircles much of the property with a primary gated entrance arising through perimeter walls and fencing at Washington Street and Retreat Avenue. Two smaller entrances are located along Maple Avenue. Paved walks link the parking areas with the main building complex, edge the main building complex to the south, connect interior buildings, and encircle the green.

Circulation: The access road that encircles much of the property is connected with the gated entrances and leads to the parking areas and building complexes.

Topography: The property is relatively level.

Plantings/Vegetation: Many mature shade and specimen trees dot the green in the center of the property. There are also shrubs and a hedge of yew that encircles a fountain.

Views & Vistas: Views are afforded across the green in places.

Water Features: Two fountains, no longer watered, are located within the green.

Buildings/Structures/Objects: There are numerous buildings on the property that date to various periods of development. A brick wall limits access to the property along the perimeter streets. A bust of Frederick Law Olmsted is near the larger of the two parking areas.

Recreational Space: The open green affords opportunities for passive recreation. The golf house suggests the former golf course use associated with the green.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The "Hartford Retreat for the Insane" was founded in 1822. At the time, Hartford was a busy town with a flourishing iron industry with notable manufacturers of such items as saddles, carriages, furniture and clothing.¹ In 1821, the Connecticut State Medical Society expressed concern for the townspeople of Hartford who suffered from mental illness, recommending the establishment of a state-funded insane asylum. The following year, the Connecticut Retreat for the Insane was established, with the first facilities built to house patients and staff and provide medical and 'moral' treatment for patients in 1823.² The site selected for the institute was "one pre-eminently calculated to attract and engage the attention and soothe and appease the morbid fancies and feelings of the patient whose faculties are not sunk below or raised above the sphere of relations that originally existed."³ From its inception, the facility was intended to provide a calm atmosphere for the patients, who until then had been treated with less than compassionate care. The early grounds provided outdoor spaces to promote health and wellness, such as flower and vegetable gardens, airing courts where patients could be outside in a safe but controlled area, and strolling paths. Records indicate

¹ Noma Williams, *The Institute of Living Cultural Landscape Report* (2007), 1.

² Williams, Cultural Landscape Report, 1.

³ 1835 Annual Report of the Retreat, from John Warner Barber, *Connecticut Historical Collections, Containing a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, &c. Relating to the History and Antiques of Every Town in Connecticut, with Geographical Descriptions* (Storrs, Connecticut: Bibliopola Press [facsimile edition], 1999), 36-37.

CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford that the state may have contacted notable landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing in the 1840s to aid with laying out the grounds, although there are no specific indications of what work might have resulted from this contact.⁴

In 1860, the facility's Superintendent, Dr. John Simpkins Butler, noted his interest in improving the grounds in his annual report, suggesting "the location of the Retreat is unsurpassed for salubrity and beauty of situation, and if ample grounds and extensive lawns could receive that adornment and finish which abundant means and refined taste can bestow, there is scarcely to be found a spot better adapted to soothe and alleviate the 'mind diseased,' or where, apparently the wounded and depressed spirit could sooner be restored to health and vigor."⁵ By 1861, he had engaged Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., and Calvert Vaux to prepare plans to improve the landscape of the grounds. Butler requested that the designers "drain and grade the ground, add to our present plantations of trees and flowering shrubs, and to open a carriage road at a more suitable distance from the building than the present one, to which the public at certain times and under suitable restrictions, may have access."⁶ He worked with Olmsted and Vaux to develop plans that realized Butler's vision. Olmsted's work on Central Park was well known at the time and that, while his father, John Olmsted, had previously served on the Retreat Board.⁷

Olmsted and Vaux's plan for the Retreat shows the site stretching from Washington Street on the western boundary, to Maple Avenue on the southern and eastern boundaries, and Retreat Avenue on the northern boundary.⁸ Plans included a planting plan of proposed trees along with a system of curvilinear roads and walks meandering through the property. When describing his intentions for the design and site, Olmsted notes "It consists of combinations of trees, standing singly or in grounds, and casting their shadows over broad stretches of turf, or repeating their beauty by reflection upon the calm surface of pools, and the predominant associations are in the highest degree tranquilizing and grateful, as expressed by the Hebrew poet: 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters.'"⁹

Olmsted's designs created a "calming and pleasing enclosure for patients with paths of varying lengths giving continuously changing views as they moved through the landscape. The problems with wetness were corrected by significant grading and drainage work and made possible the outdoor exercise and change of scenery that were considered very important parts of the treatment of patients."¹⁰ There were also two perspective drawings of the Museum designed by Vaux and the entrance Gate from Retreat Avenue. The grounds were referred to on the plans as "Retreat Park," and indicated as open to the public, "demonstrating its value to the community, and changing the perception of the treatment of the mentally ill from its negative past to a more positive contemporary view."¹¹

Although Olmsted was involved in developing the site plan, he was unable to oversee its implementation. To address this need, Olmsted recommended that Jacob Weidenmann be hired for the job. Weidenmann, who was born in Switzerland and had studied fine arts, botany, engineering, and architecture, began work on the project as early as 1861.¹²

Olmsted and Vaux continued to prepare plans for the Retreat, with Vaux designing several buildings. Over time, the facility has expanded with many new buildings along the northern portion of the site, as well as the western and southern areas. At some point the property was enclosed by a perimeter brick wall, which does not appear on the Olmsted plans. Parking has been added to the eastern side, while the central green has undergone several uses over time, including as a golf course. Although the golf course is no longer present,

⁴ 1845 Annual Report of the Retreat, 5.

⁵ 1860 Annual Report of the Retreat, 6.

⁶ 1861 Annual Report of the Retreat, 30.

⁷ Williams, Cultural Landscape Report, 6.

⁸ Williams, Cultural Landscape Report, 8.

⁹ Charles E. Beveridge and Paul Rocheleau, *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape* (New York, New York: Rizzoli International, 1995), 37.

¹⁰ Williams, Cultural Landscape Report, 10.

¹¹ Williams, *Cultural Landscape Report*, 8 from 1864 Annual Report of the Retreat, 18.

¹² Williams, Cultural Landscape Report, 8, from Favretti, 56.

CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford a golf house building continues to reflect this use. A bust of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. was added to the property in 2005.

Olmsted's designs for the property remain relatively intact, although a specific planting plan dating to the 1860s has not been located. The numerous mature trees, some of which have been designated state champions, are believed to have been planted based on Olmsted's recommendations. Although intrusions such as growing urbanization of the neighborhoods and the introduction of parking lots, the grounds retain the essence of the "calm, soothing retreat enhanced by the great trees," that Olmsted referenced in his designs for the property.

REFERENCES

- Barber, John Warner. *Connecticut Historical Collections, Containing a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, &c. Relating to the History and Antiques of Every Town in Connecticut, with Geographical Descriptions.* Storrs, Connecticut: Bibliopola Press (facsimile edition), 1999.
- Beveridge, Charles E. and Paul Rocheleau. *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape.* New York, New York: Rizzoli International, 1995.
- Connecticut ASLA. "Institute of Living." *The Olmsted Legacy Trail.* Available online at https://www.olmstedlegacytrail.com/institute-of-living.
- Favretti, Rudy J. *Jacob Weidenmann pioneer landscape architect.* Hartford, Connecticut: Cedar Hill Cemetery Foundation, Inc. in conjunction with Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

Williams, Norma. The Institute of Living Cultural Landscape Report. November 2007.

CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford

GRAPHICS



CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford



JOB: 12015 LOCATION: Hartford PROJECT: Hartford Insane Asylum

0 75 150 300 U I I I I I I I Z US Feet CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford



Drawing of the Institute of Living Grounds, 1861, Jacob Weidenmann. (Source: Jacob Weidenmann, Beautifying Country Homes: A Handbook of Landscape Gardening [1870; facsimile, American Life Foundation, 1978)



View east towards the entrance court and the original core building complex facing Washington Street. (All photographs taken by authors in 2021 unless otherwise noted)

CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford



View southeast across the green from the perimeter road.



View southwest across the green.

CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford



View south of a circular hedge enclosing a fountain feature.



View north of the fountain.

CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford



View east of one of the walks as it passes the golf house.



View southeast of the perimeter road and parking areas that have been built within the eastern part of the green. A dissected Japanese maple and fountain and low stone wall are in the foreground.

CONTINUATION SHEET Hartford Insane Asylum (#12015) / 200 Retreat Avenue, Hartford



View northwest of the bust of Frederick Law Olmsted erected on the grounds in 2005 near the parking area.