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New Life for Staten Island's Derelict Farm Colony

Building Blocks

By DAVID W. DUNLAP JAN. 20, 2016

The Farm Colony.

It sounds remote. It is remote, so distant from the rest of New York in its wooded isolation at the center of Staten Island that the bank robber Willie Sutton was able to work there quietly — hiding in plain sight — for a few years after a 1947 prison break. As a city employee, at that.

It is so remote that it was forgotten by just about everyone after it closed as a home for the aged poor in 1975; everyone, that is, except Staten Islanders who chafed while the abandoned 96-acre campus, officially part of the New York City Farm Colony-Seaview Hospital Historic District, fell into hopeless disrepair.

That is the Farm Colony today: a place of advanced ruin and intense vegetation, like a Mayan site where buildings appear at first to be natural formations, until you spy human-laid masonry under the enveloping, strangling greenery.

Theoretically, the place is off limits. Try telling that to paintballers, graffiti painters and vandals.

But this is not the nadir of its long existence.

That came in 1999, when James S. Oddo, then a city councilman whose district included the Farm Colony, persuaded City Hall to allow demolition of a historical dormitory as an emergency safety measure, without first seeking approval from the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

On Tuesday, in a much different political climate, the City Council approved a plan by the New York City Economic Development Corporation to sell 45 acres of the Farm Colony parcel to Raymond Masucci, a Staten Island developer, for \$1.

At a cost of about \$91 million, Mr. Masucci would rehabilitate five remaining buildings on the site, tear down five others and preserve a 112-year-old men's dormitory as a stabilized ruin. He would also construct three six-story apartment buildings and 14 multiple-unit townhouses, some with built-in garages, for a total of 344 condominiums. They would start opening next year.

"You feel both like you're not in New York but also immersed in its history," Maria Torres-Springer, the president and chief executive of the Economic Development Corporation, said recently as she walked — gingerly — through the fieldstone shell of the 102-year-old dining hall.

Wariness is warranted here, where staircases no longer have treads, banisters hang at crazy angles and gaping elevator shafts no longer contain elevators, at least in one piece.

Mr. Masucci said this building would have 24 apartments, with parking in the basement.

Units at Landmark Colony, as the project is called, would be sold only to those 55 and older. Thirty-four apartments would be set aside as "affordable"; that is, for residents with family incomes no greater than 155 percent of

the area median, or about \$130,000 to \$155,000.

There would be 17 acres of landscaped open space with public access, including what remains of a potter's field at the north end of the site.

As the development corporation sees it, the city gets a lot of bang for the buck that Mr. Masucci is paying: the rehabilitation of a dangerous, derelict property; housing for older adults; the renovation of several historical buildings; the creation of new landscaping and publicly accessible space; and the construction of new roads and utilities.

Both the landmarks commission and the City Planning Commission have approved the project, designed by Vengoechea & Boyland, which is headed by the architects Pablo E. Vengoechea, a former vice chairman of the landmarks commission, and Timothy G. Boyland, whose maternal grandmother, Madeline Jefferys Henri, worked as a practical nurse at the Farm Colony from 1945 to 1965.

Mrs. Henri must have made the acquaintance of one "Eddie Lynch," an orderly in Wards 27 and 31 in the late '40s. Outside the Farm Colony, he was known as Willie Sutton, a notorious bank robber and fugitive. Through a biographer, Quentin Reynolds, Mr. Sutton professed his love of the colony and its residents.

"The men and women who were ending their lives there were treated with dignity by the dedicated nurses and attendants," Mr. Reynolds wrote in "I, Willie Sutton." But there was no disguising their desperation, he said. "The only thing they had of value was the breath in their frail bodies."

Their frailties caused the city in 1925 to lift the requirement that residents work on a vegetable farm to earn their board. That had been the guiding principle since 1829, when the institution was founded as the Richmond County Poor Farm, in the Willowbrook section. The last residents were moved out in 1975.

Mr. Oddo, who is now the borough president of Staten Island, expressed satisfaction at the outcome.

“The project we have now is true to the history of this wonderful property,” he said. “Depending what day you ask me, I will tell you it was or was not worth the aggravation. Today, it is.”

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