

Dumbarton Oaks Park: A Walk on the Wild Side

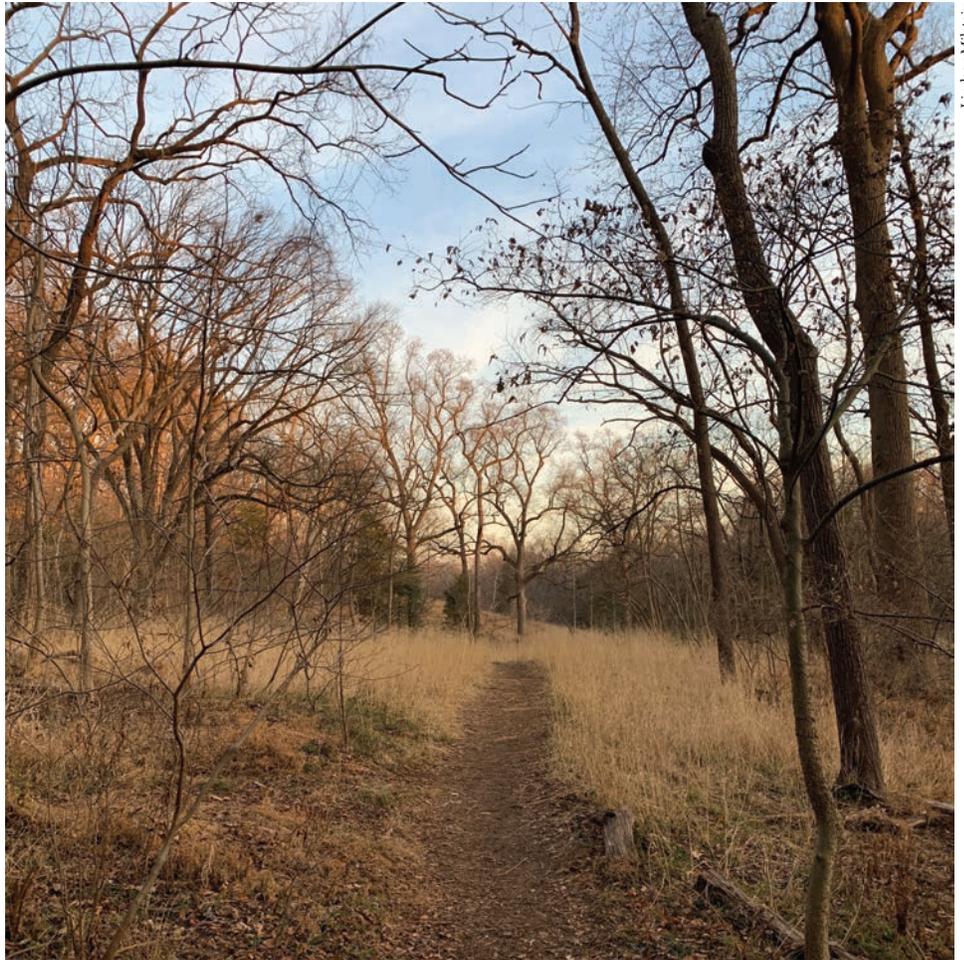
by Lindsey Milstein, President and Board Co-Chair, and Liza Gilbert, Board Co-Chair, Dumbarton Oaks Park Conservancy

White oaks spread their wide curving branches in Dumbarton Oaks Park, the only remaining wild garden designed by Beatrix Farrand. Located in Washington, D.C., the park is a 27-acre urban oasis and wild companion to the 16-acre formal garden of Mildred and Robert Bliss's Dumbarton Oaks estate.

Named for the towering white and black oaks on the property, Dumbarton Oaks is the product of a 20-year collaboration between the Bliss family and Farrand, a founding member of the American Society of Landscape Architects. It is a masterwork of landscape design, listed by the National Register of Historic Sites in 1967. The wild garden was gifted to the National Park Service (NPS) in 1941.

Dumbarton Oaks Park Conservancy (Conservancy) was formed in 2010 to work in partnership with NPS to restore, promote, and maintain the park. The site was in ruins due to inadequate NPS resources to control invasive vines and stormwater damage, which hindered the public from enjoying and learning about this historic landscape. As the stewards of this storied garden, we wondered what sparked the imaginations of Farrand and Mildred Bliss in 1921 when they first walked the site to envision and plan the construction of a wild garden. Was it the nestled stream valley with its dramatic topography that tapped into a sense of awe and possibility? Or the copses of noble oak, beech, sycamore, maple, and tulip poplar that created a ceiling that cast shadow and shade on the ground? Or the remnant meadows from the site's agrarian past?

These elemental pieces of the landscape remain, though affected by the passage of time. The brilliance of the design is that it incorporates each of these elements into a landscape story. Each visitor to this urban oasis experiences the depth of narrative that began over 98 years ago. Farrand wrote, "Perhaps the so-called natural garden is the most difficult to fit in with its surroundings, because there is no set line to act as the



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Dumbarton Oaks Park: the historic Clifton Walk path

backbone to the composition, and the whole effect must be obtained from masses of color, contrasting heights and varieties of texture without any straight line to be used as an axis.¹

The first steps for the Conservancy were to protect the health of the existing stands of historic canopy trees and stabilize historic built features. This nearly lost designed landscape requires restoration with integrated treatments for stormwater and invasive plant management, and reestablishing a native plant matrix within the framework of Farrand's original design. Farrand used the oaks and other native trees to create a tapestry of color, texture, and light in her designs.

In the intervening years we have come to better understand the importance of trees beyond the aesthetic domain, including their role in carbon sequestration, sustaining flora and fauna, cooling urban environments, and connecting urban residents to the healing power of nature. This year the Conservancy, NPS, and Casey

Trees, a local nonprofit dedicated to re-treesing Washington, D.C., are repopulating the oaks that have succumbed to age and disease to begin the garden's next century with a new generation of oaks, our national tree.

We can only save and restore these beloved and important landscapes through partnerships, such as our California Oaks Coalition, united by a shared vision of oaks' importance. Farrand once wrote, we must continue "with the vision that sees the future through the present and bravely works toward that vision."¹ Her prescience guides us as we work to revive and share the complexity and beauty of the wild garden design of her masterwork, Dumbarton Oaks. For more information on the Conservancy visit: dopark.org/.

¹ Pearson, C. *The Collected Writings of Beatrix Farrand: American Landscape Gardener: 1872-1959*. U Press New England, 2009. p 81, 220.