

QUITE 'THE FARM'

Frederic Church's Olana remains an inspiration

By ANN GIBBONS
Freeman staff

GREENPORT — Frederic Church, the renowned 19th century Hudson River School painter, is revered for his magnificent landscapes of the majestic American wilderness. But, it's little understood that his grandest, yet most intimate, landscape was, in fact, his home, Olana, in Greenport.



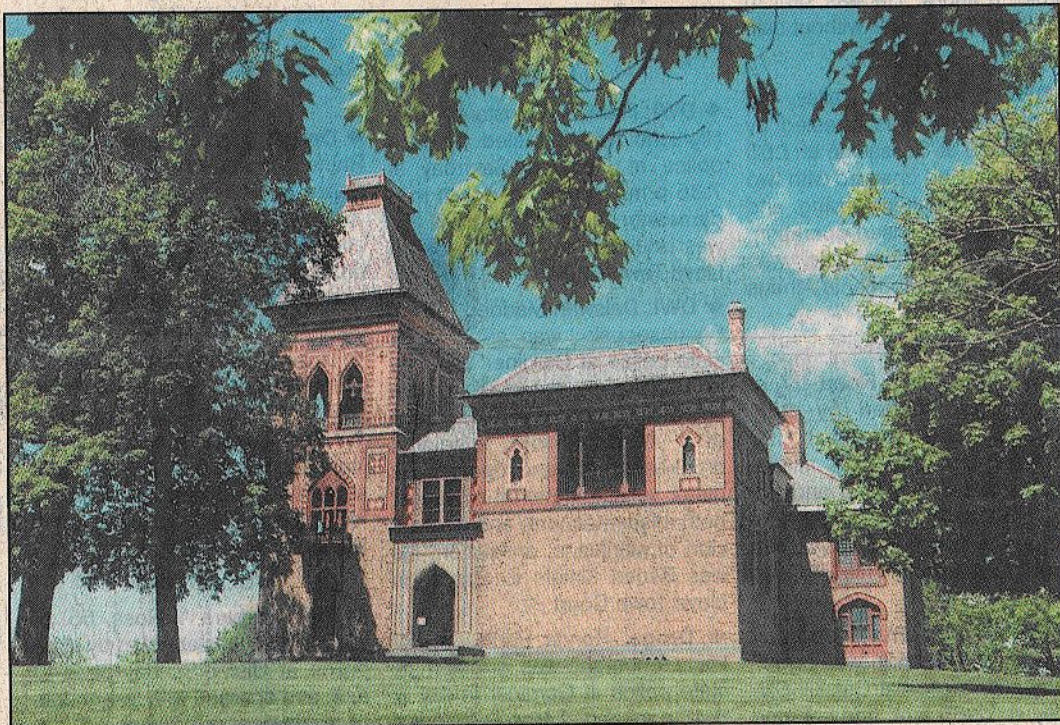
Griffen

Named for an ancient Persian fortress treasure house, and inspired by the painter's trips to the Middle East, Olana was intended by Church to

refer to the entire 373 acres that he ultimately purchased, beginning in 1860 with a small farm of 126 acres that he immediately began to cultivate, according to Sara Griffen, president of the Olana Partnership, a private-public partnership with the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

"Church and Isabel, his wife, always called Olana 'the farm,'" Griffen said. In reading Church's vast collection of letters to other artists, architects, friends and conservationists, the Partnership gained a broader perspective

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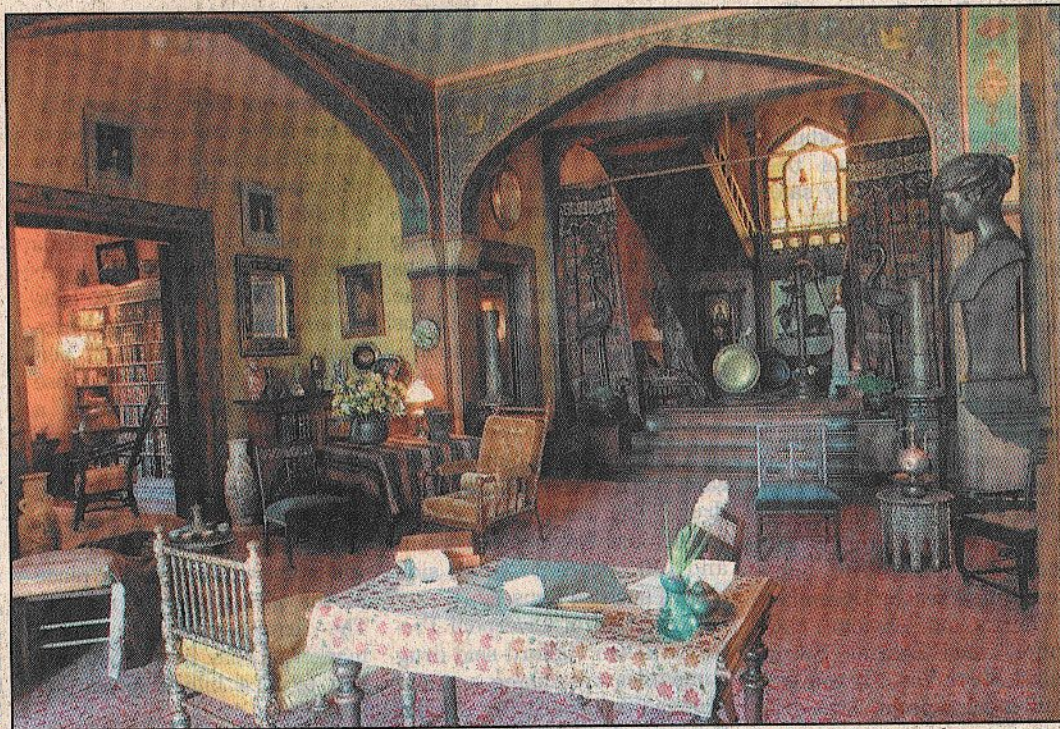


Freeman photos by Tania Barricklo

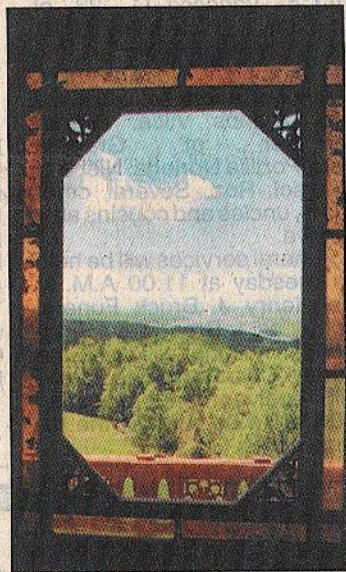
Olana as one would see it on the approach up the carriage road. Trees are being planted to conceal it more, as Frederic Church had originally designed it.

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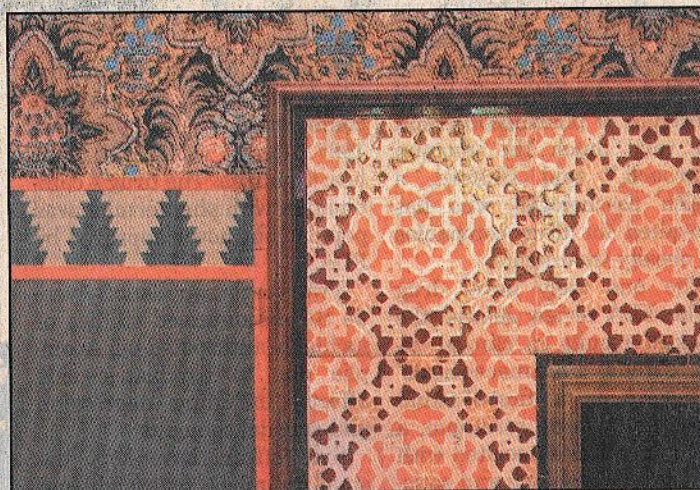
See today's online question about this story on this page.



ABOVE: The main downstairs room called the court holds a number of the objects Frederic Church collected on his travels.



A view from an upstairs bedroom.



AT LEFT: Exquisite detail can be seen on a fireplace and in wallpaper in an upstairs bedroom.

Corrections

Church's Olana remains an inspiration

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on the property it holds dear.

"In the beginning, the focus was house-centric," Griffen said. "But, we needed to understand what visitors today cared about. And, it's not just the house. It's all of Olana."

She pointed out that Church's use of the natural landscape is integral to an historical understanding of what people care about today. As in Church's time, conservation of America's natural beauty is high on that list, she said.

What interested artists of the Hudson River School, as well as writers and naturalists of the time, was the intricate relationship between human beings and the natural world, and the connection of the cultivated and natural landscape, she said.

When developing the house and parkland, Church followed the Picturesque style of the period that emphasized the beauty of the natural landscape by re-arranging the composition, much like a painting, Griffen said.

THE ORIGINAL property was not especially beautiful, but Church worked with what he had, transforming the scruffy grassland and farmland of the existing property into a deliberate composition, what he called "a living work of art," of forest, orchard, hills, a lake, open spaces and carriage drives as carefully wrought as his compelling landscapes.

Church, along with Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park, was a member of the Century Association; one of their successes was the creation of the Niagara Falls State Park. Church's painting of Niagara Falls is among one of his many amazing paintings of the American landscape that astonished the world with its wild, strange, untrammelled beauty.

Olana continually references Central Park, with its now-you-see-it, now-you-don't vistas, gently winding carriage drives that offer peeks at the astounding river and mountains views, and then, the coup de grace, the house itself, said Kate Kerin, landscape curator.

"Church created the views he wanted his guests to see," Kerin said. Olana is the quintessential Romantic, Picturesque landscape. For Church, she observed, Olana was a work of art, as carefully executed as his most exacting painting, with foreground, middle ground, background, light, shadow, views and hidden recesses.

"Not a single detail, on the grounds, the lake he created,

the views, the plantings of native species he undertook, every aspect of every room in the house, the studio, was left to chance," Kerin said. "He planned everything down to the tiniest detail."

An infusion of interest in landscape, coupled with a rethinking of what Olana is about, has been responsible for a trajectory of individual support for the property, said Griffen, who has been with the Partnership for 20 years.

Several grants, large and small, in the last few years has enabled the Partnership to embark on an ambitious capital campaign to fund improvements that the public may not be conscious of, such as, heating and ventilation in the house, burying wires underground and opening some new views. "Not the sexy stuff," said Griffen, but necessary for upkeep to the more than 100-year-old house and property.

"The farm and orchards today only hint at their 19th century appearance," Kerin said. When the planting project is complete, visitors will experience Olana as Church intended, she said.

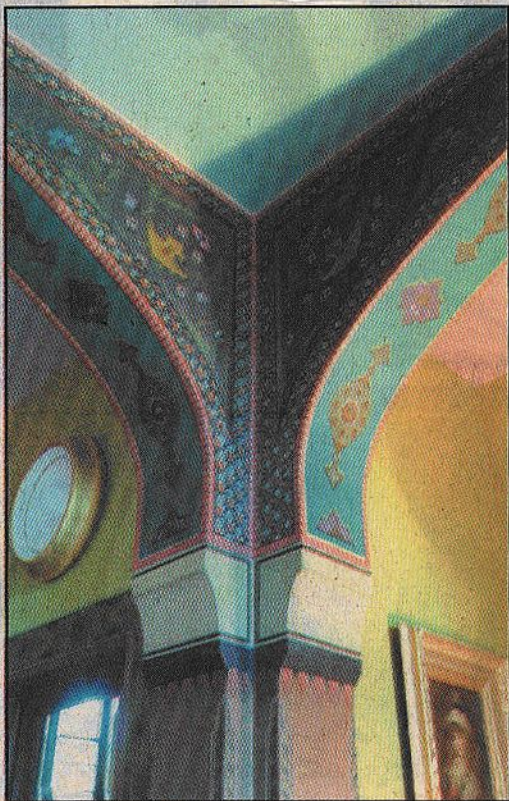
A small \$25,000 Burpee grant will permit planting trees around the house, and a \$250,000 landscape grant is part of the momentum to re-establish Church's plantings as a way to restore the views that were such a dynamic and interactive aspect of the visitor's experience of Olana, according to Kerin.

The Partnership already has restored the family's first dwelling on the site, the 1860 Cosy Cottage, which now houses the Partnership's office, and the Wagon House Educational Center, has been rebuilt on the footings of the original building which was taken down in the 1940s. The latter serves as an educational center for both children and adults. The next building restoration will be the 1896 barn, and pre-1896 barn, both of which are still standing, but dilapidated.

THE \$250,000 grant will enable the Partnership to start replanting the native trees as Church designed the site and to restore the viewsheds he also designed, according to Bob Burns, vice president of development, who wrote the grant.

"As part of Olana's comprehensive plan, signed by the state and the Partnership, we'll begin to restore the views as Church intended and designed," Burns said.

"We've already opened some views, but we're also going to restore the meadows, which a Hudsonia study tells us will be better for small bird and animal life rather than the



An example of the colorful stenciling found in the Court Hall at Olana.

Freeman photo by Tania Barricklo

smaller trees that have cropped up. Because of migratory bird patterns, we have a short window every year to do the work," Burns said.

Ultimately, Burns said, the Partnership's long-term goals are to build a new visitors' center and to reopen North Road off state Route 23 that was Church's preferred entrance for visitors, because he designed it to tease and entice guests with snatched and intermittent glimpses of the river and mountains on all sides, and, of course, the ultimate goal, the house.

WHEN ALL IS SAID and done, those who have never visited Olana are knocked over by the house, especially if a visitor approaches it as Church intended, from the long, curving, winding North Road leading to the summit of the hill it dominates.

The road is not open yet, but visitors may re-create the experience of the house by taking a path to the back where guests would halt in wonder at the 360-degree views of mountains, the sparkle of the Hudson River below and the gorgeous home that beckoned them.

The house still beckons. New this season is the opening of the restored second floor where Church and his wife had equally intriguing and beautifully decorated bedrooms, dressing room and guest rooms, according to Evelyn Trebilcock, curator.

Trebilcock said the "best" guest room, looking West to the Hudson and the Catskills, was restored last season, as the Evelyn and Maurice Sharp Gallery, and is used as a small, lovely space for Church-related exhibits. This year, the exhibit is "Fern Hunting among these Picturesque Mountains: Fred-

eric Edwin Church in Jamaica." It's open to the public through Oct. 31.

Trebilcock also gave a preview tour of the Church bedroom. Pointing to the wallpaper, which had been painted over by a descendant, she said she had about 80 percent of the original pattern and an expert in historic wallpaper restoration was able to provide the missing segment. The wallpaper was then reproduced and installed. The same was done in the couple's dressing room with a gorgeous, navy blue paper with golden highlights.

Trebilcock said she has had a bit of luck in restoring the second floor. For example, a staircase in the dressing room, that leads to the tower and the nursery, had been removed, but stored in the basement. It needed some work, but was in good condition. It has been reinstalled in its original location.

"I AM SO fortunate. When my colleagues restore buildings, they need to purchase furniture and artifacts. I just go up to the attic and start looking. What I need is invariably there," she said, noting that Church's descendants keep most of the family purchases and property intact.

Olana will hold its eighth annual Summer Party on Saturday, July 24, 7-11 p.m., featuring live music, dancing, and Caribbean cuisine. Tickets are \$75 for members of the Olana Partnership and \$90 for non-members. For further information on the party, call (518) 828-1872 or go to www.olana.org.

Olana State Historic Site is located on state Route 9G in Greenport. Further information may be obtained by calling (518) 828-0135.