

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE OLD STONE HOUSE

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Photograph by Caroline Mardok

By Frank Haberle

Long before there was a Park Slope Food Coop (or a Park Slope neighborhood, or for that matter, any “Slope” at all) there was the Old Stone House. In 1699, Dutch settlers built a little stone farmhouse by a marsh, on land that had been occupied and used by the Lenape tribe for thousands of years. In August 1776, during the Battle of Long Island, a key battle in the American Revolutionary War, this small building became the focal point of the battle, changing hands between the British and the Americans several times, as the Continental army slipped over the Gowanus. Later, the building became the clubhouse of the original Brooklyn Dodgers; was buried as part of the re-grading of the current neighborhood; and was then reconstructed, along with the surrounding Washington Park, as a WPA project during the 1930s.

The Old Stone House (OSH) and the park, located between Third and Fourth Streets and Fourth and Fifth Avenues, have evolved, like the neighborhood itself, over the last thirty years, to meet the needs and interests of a diverse community. Before the Covid-19 crisis closed its doors, children from surrounding schools visited the old building to learn about both the battle and the Revolution. Upstairs, people of all ages gathered for small concerts and readings, community meetings, and crafting classes. Summer months saw daytime soccer games and evening concerts, as well as movies and plays on the west side of the park. On the east side of the park, children and parents played and relaxed on the beautifully sculpted playground. All around the park's perimeter are magnificent plantings and gardens, the product of a 15-year permaculture project that returned native plants and trees to a place where they flourished long before European settlers.



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As a non-profit organization, OSH finds ways to best serve the current educational, cultural, and social needs of the community, while also paying tribute to the full and

complete history of the place where it stands. “People in the community see OSH as a small building dedicated solely to commemorating its role in the Revolution, but they don’t necessarily know that we are a conservancy, caring for the surrounding Washington Park and JJ Byrne playground. We have a range of offerings, designed to bring the community together,” said Kim Maier, Executive Director for the last sixteen years. “OSH and the surrounding grounds are a lot like a town square—a place in the heart of Brooklyn where people from all walks of life get to know each other as neighbors. During the pandemic and this summer of social unrest, preserving this space is more important than ever.”

OSH has reopened, by appointment, for pods of up to six; and has installed a new contemporary art exhibit, “Brooklyn Utopias: 2020.” The exhibit explores how Brooklyn has continued to change over the past decade—while acknowledging Brooklyn’s past, present, and future—by inviting artists to present contrasting visions of an ideal Brooklyn. The work can also be seen on the OSH website.

Re-Setting Education Programs: The Whole Story



Photograph by Caroline Mardok

The Covid-19 pandemic and social unrest of the last six months have only reinforced OSH's commitment to inclusive, civic-minded programming. This begins with teaching history. "The Covid crisis and the closing of our park and building for safety reasons gave us a chance to hit 're-set,'" said Maggie Weber, Director of Education. "OSH has always been trying to make our work relevant to the whole Brooklyn community. We are traditionally a Revolutionary War site, but when you take a closer look, we learn that when the original building was built in 1699, Brooklyn was already a remarkably diverse place. While the native Lenape had been pushed back by aggressive Dutch settlers, they had been coming to this place for at least ten centuries. At the time this building was created, 40% of Brooklyn's residents were of African descent. Women played a huge role in these settlements, but are often overlooked in the telling of the stories of places like these." A curriculum development project currently underway, entitled "Crossroads 1702," will educate local students and visitors by telling the stories of *all* the people who have lived in this place.

To build young people's understanding of civic education and responsibility, OSH educators will deliver the Democracy Project to seventh graders in schools across Brooklyn. The semester-long residency uses dramatic play to help seventh graders learn the events that led up to the American Revolution. "The middle schoolers create their own colonies, name them, discover what kinds of natural resources they have," Maggie explained. "Then they impose taxation, pilfer from each other, and pay each other for protection. Finally, they are introduced to the ideas of democracy. Representation and justice become more real. They learn how elections work." In the fall, OSH staff are preparing to make this program an online offering for remote learning.

OSH is also exploring how to create a unique learning pod that will be made affordable for children and families with fewer resources, including the children of essential workers. The children will be working outside for the entirety of the program—planting and digging and learning about the gardens. Other resources for families offered through OSH include new online crafting programs for kids.

Washington Park's Permaculture Plantings and Gardens



Photograph by Caroline Mardok

For fifteen years, Park Slope Food Coop member and neighborhood gardening legend Claudia Joseph committed herself to being the gardener of Washington Park. She put in trees, plants, and flowers, with the goal of creating a permaculture garden using va-

rieties native to the American Northeast. Claudia retired from OSH two years ago. This March, Sam Lewis, a native New Yorker, started his new job as Director of Gardens—just before the park closed.

“The permaculture gardens that Claudia developed here are just unbelievable,” Sam said. “There are medicinal and native plants. You look around the park, and you are surrounded by an edible food forest in the middle of the city, designed in layers—a canopy of persimmon and pear and fruit trees, a middle layer of raspberries, gooseberries, blueberries, and agastache. This was all Claudia’s work. The challenge for me is to preserve the amazing gardens Claudia designed, while also introducing more flowering plants—to bring different colors and textures—so that people visiting the park are surrounded by beautiful colors.”

One project Sam has already taken on is the development of an untended garden space along Fifth Avenue. “There was only a patch of dirt behind a locked gate,” Sam explains. “Working with volunteers, we turned it into a shade garden with a picnic table, surrounded by native plants including those the Lenape would recognize.” Sam is working on the food-producing part of the garden, with an eye toward providing for people in need. “We donate the food we grow to several community refrigerator pop-ups that have been operating around the neighborhood since the Covid crisis began,” Sam says. “I drop off a load of tomatoes or eggplant, and when I go back the next day, they’re gone.” Sam is also working on a project with young people from the Ali Forney Center’s LEAP internship program.

The Coop has collaborated with OSH on composting for years. Members collect and deliver sawdust and scraps from the Coop to the composting bins for their work slot. This work has been suspended while member labor is on hiatus. Sam emphasized that Coop members interested in bringing their home food scraps for composting would be most welcome, as would any volunteers to work on the gardens and plantings teams. Volunteers work Tuesdays and Thursdays. Members should contact Sam directly for more information on composting and volunteering: slewis@oldstonehouse.org.

For more information on events and activities at The Old Stone House, please visit the website: <https://theoldstonehouse.org>.



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