

1970

MAGNOLIA GRANDIFLORA, 679 Lafayette Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn; c.1885.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 1785, the following portions of Lots 58, 59 and 60: Starting at a point on the front property line of Lot 58, 17 feet east of the southwest corner of the said lot, thence north 20 feet, thence west 40 feet, thence south 20 feet, thence east 40 feet along the front property lines of Lots 60, 59 and 58 to the point of beginning.

On February 3, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Magnolia Grandiflora and of the proposed designation of Tax Map Block 1785, Lot 59 as the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). Eighteen individuals were recorded as being in favor of designation of the tree as a Landmark; there was no opposition. Eight of the speakers urged the enlargement of the Landmark Site and made various proposals for the protection of the tree. On March 3, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of Tax Map Block 1785, Lots 58, 59, 60 and 61 as the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). Nine persons spoke in favor of the proposed enlarged Landmark Site, and eight persons opposed it. Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. In addition, a number of written and telegraphed communications have been received offering various views on the proposed Landmark designation and, in particular, with various suggestions as to its appropriate protection if designated.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The genus Magnolia was named after Pierre Magnol (1638-1715), professor of medicine and director of the botanical gardens at Montpellier in the south of France. Some twenty species are distributed in Japan, China, the Himalayas and the southeastern United States. The most beautiful of the North American species is Magnolia grandiflora, the "laurel magnolia," an evergreen tree which grows with a straight trunk to a height of over 70 feet. The specific name "grandiflora" refers to its large white, lemon-scented flowers which are the official State flowers of both Louisiana and Mississippi. Magnolia grandiflora was one of the earliest exotic plants to have been introduced to Europe from this continent; it was brought to England in 1734. While the species rarely flourishes here much north of Philadelphia, there is a specimen in the Bronx Botanical Garden which has been carefully maintained out of doors in a very sheltered location.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that the seedling which Mr. William Lemken had sent up from North Carolina some 85 years ago, to plant in the front yard of his house at 679 Lafayette Avenue should have survived so long. It is thus both for its inherent beauty as well as for its rare hardiness that this particular Magnolia grandiflora has become a neighborhood symbol and a focus of community pride.

The person who, almost single-handedly, has been responsible for arousing local appreciation of the tree and in directing this appreciation towards practical steps for its preservation is Mrs. Hattie Carthan, affectionately known as "the tree lady." Some seventeen years ago she literally adopted the Magnolia grandiflora as her own.

When in the course of redevelopment it was determined that a wall would be needed to protect the tree, if the houses behind it were razed, she discovered that \$20,000 would be required to build it. Realistically, she set her sights on raising \$5,000. This was done through the good will and interest of children in the neighborhood and of those in Public Schools No. 44 and No. 256, working in conjunction with the Bedford-Stuyvesant Beautification Association, Inc. of which she is a member. She set up a program whereby the children sold paper magnolia leaves in a raffle for which three prizes were established. This program was heartily endorsed and backed by the "Operations Better Block" program in cooperation with the Mayor's Urban Action Task Force and by the Model Cities Program. The sale of "leaves" brought in \$7,000, and the Horticultural Society in New York has offered to match them dollar for dollar.

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It is this wall which was proposed at the hearing of February 3, 1970 and, with modifications, again on March 3, 1970 that was the only point of controversy.

The proponents of the wall argued that it would provide adequate protection for the tree when the houses at 677, 678, 679 and 680 were demolished, that these houses must be demolished in order to permit the erection of a 120-unit housing project with its legally required parking spaces, that redesign of the project -- either by omission of some units or by enlargement of the site -- would entail resubmission to the Federal Housing Authority, would involve at least a year's delay, and, with rising construction costs, might prove impossible to finance.

Opponents argued that demolition of the existing houses and erection of the wall presented serious threats to the life of the tree and that the wall when completed as proposed, and even with the former cellar areas of Nos. 679 and 680 retained and heated (as agreed to by proponents), would not properly protect the tree from the wind. They urged variously that some, if not all, of the four houses be retained, that the three brownstone houses (Nos. 677, 678 and 679) qualified as architectural landmarks, that one or more of them should be converted to a museum or a cultural and educational center and that there was a local need for such a facility.

Horticultural experts agreed that any disturbance to the surroundings of such a rare and delicate tree or any change in its microclimate presented some risk. They differed in their evaluation of the effectiveness of the proposed wall, and of the hazard that different aspects of its construction might entail. They pointed out that even the demolition of the houses to the east of No. 680, which had already occurred, might in itself have affected the delicate balance of conditions that are responsible for the tree's survival thus far.

In the face of this spectrum of technical opinion and this conflict in community interests, the Landmarks Preservation Commission has had to define its proper role and the limits of its responsibility:

- (1) The Commission is unanimous in its desire to designate the Magnolia Grandiflora at 679 Lafayette Avenue as an official Landmark of the City of New York.
- (2) The Commission, no more than any of the ardent proponents of this designation, wishes to see a dead tree as a Landmark.
- (3) We fully realize, however, the need for good new housing in Bedford-Stuyvesant and it would be irresponsible for the Commission, through too limited a view of its role, to jeopardize or delay the construction of a project, developed by another agency of the City, when the requisite approvals and financing are in hand.
- (4) The Commission, furthermore, has no authority to decide whether or not a museum or other cultural facility should be created here nor any jurisdiction over funds to create or operate one.
- (5) Within these limitations, our responsibility has been to devise and recommend the best possible means to protect and to preserve the tree. This we have done through numerous conferences with the most knowledgeable horticulturalists we could find and with the architects of the adjacent project -- all of whom have generously given us of their time and expertise.
- (6) While grateful for this assistance, the Commission assumes full responsibility for its recommendations. We offer them in the sincere belief that they represent the best possible solution under the existing circumstances. If these circumstances should be changed through the action of other agencies, the Commission will be glad to reconsider its recommendations and to modify them in any practicable way which at that time may appear to further diminish the risks.

- (7) Finally, neither this Commission, nor anyone else, can guarantee the life of a tree. All anyone can do is to balance the claims of conflicting interests and propose what seems, with the best available advice, the best to us under all existing circumstances. This we have tried to do in the following specifications.

LANDMARK SITE SPECIFICATIONS

- 1) Development of Landmark Site shall be in general accordance with Drawings No. 1 and No. 2 entitled "Magnolia Plaza, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Model Cities Site 10, Protective Devices for Magnolia Grandiflora" prepared by Castro-Blanco, Piscioneri & Feder, Architects, and dated April 1, 1970. Particular attention is called to the notes on these drawings which are essential conditions of the Commission's recommendations.
- 2) In addition:
 - (a) All demolition and new construction, including connection in an operating condition of thermostatically controlled heating elements, shall be carried through within one season. Work shall not start earlier than April 30th nor be completed later than October 15th.
 - (b) Demolition of No. 680 and the partial demolition of No. 679, including access to and from the work, shall be carried out from the north side of the existing facades.
 - (c) Blocking up of masonry openings of No. 679 and all other new construction shall be carried out from the north side of the facade insofar as possible and except as noted in (e) below.
 - (d) During demolition and new construction, except as noted in (e) below, the south faces of No. 679 (and of No. 680 until it is demolished) shall be covered with a tight tarpaulin or plastic sheet in order to protect the tree from dust and mortar droppings. The tree itself shall at no time be covered.
 - (e) Great care is to be exercised in applying the brownstone stucco finish to the blocked openings of No. 679 and in particular where the branches touch the facade. It is suggested that the work be done from ladders or a short suspended painters' platform rather than from fixed scaffolding. The surface of the stucco should be finished as far back from the existing brownstone face as conditions permit.
 - (f) During the course of construction not only of the Protective Devices for the Magnolia Grandiflora but also of the adjoining housing project and parking lot, the tree should be under close and constant guard. It should be watered when necessary and the leaves hosed down when dusty.
 - (g) All phases of the surrounding work must be carefully supervised. Particular caution must be taken in reconstructing the sidewalk in front of the tree, in installing the iron fence around it, and in trenching for utilities. Since the tree roots may well extend under Lafayette Avenue to Tompkins Park, any unavoidable trenches should be kept on the south side of the Lafayette Avenue roadbed so as to avoid cutting the roots.
 - (h) It is suggested that a record be obtained of the winter temperatures that have been typically maintained in the front basement rooms of No. 679 and No. 680 so that the thermostat setting of the new heating units can reproduce former conditions as closely as possible. It may be as bad for the tree to overheat the ground as to underheat it.
 - (i) It is suggested that euonymus or some other hardy ground cover be planted in the fenced area around the tree so as to permit air and moisture to reach the roots. There should be as little disturbance as possible to the existing subsurface drainage or level of the water table.
 - (j) Finally, it is suggested that competent horticulturalists be engaged to advise on the tree's health and care. They may wish to try tap feeding of any roots that extend into Tompkins Park. In addition to the seeds currently being propagated by members of the New York Horticultural Society, they may wish to propagate cuttings from the tree. They would be a form of replacement insurance if, despite all care and precautions, the tree should die.

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In any event, the tree will in the course of time die of old age, and cuttings from this rare and famous specimen may be the source of a new strain that can thrive more widely in this climate.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history and other features of this tree, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Magnolia Grandiflora has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Magnolia Grandiflora is a natural phenomenon which by rare good fortune has prospered and grown to great size in the heart of the City and far from its usual habitat, that it is situated for all to see and that, when provided with the protective devices specified herein, it gives every reasonable promise of surviving as a joy to nature lovers for years to come.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Magnolia Grandiflora, 679 Lafayette Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates the following portions of Tax Map Block 1785, Lots 58, 59 and 60, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site: starting at a point on the front property line of Lot 58, 17 feet east of the southwest corner of the said lot, thence north 20 feet, thence west 40 feet, thence south 20 feet, thence east 40 feet along the front property lines of Lots 60, 59 and 58 to the point of beginning.