



ILLUSTRATION BY TOM LEE, TL STUDIO

MAKING A

# GRAND

ENTRANCE

A jewel on our Hilltop,  
Main Drive gets a gold-star makeover

We're in on the secret now, but can any of us forget the first time we arrived at St. George's? The moment when, about midway down the Main Drive, the stunning view of the ocean appeared to the east and the chapel tower rose from behind Old School?

Indeed, the entrance to St. George's has been a showstopper ever since our founder, the Rev. John Byron Diman, purchased the land here in 1901 and Old School was sited nearly 200 yards off Purgatory Road. Now, this summer, we've begun a comprehensive renovation project meant to help preserve our grand entrance for the next 120 years.



Key to the new plan, according to landscape architect Tom Lee, is a mindset toward sustainability — improving the soil and limiting runoff, as well as removing invasive, non-native plants and replacing them with more appropriate species.

What remained of the original trees that lined the drive have been removed, and special attention is going toward planting heartier, native trees in a new, healthy soil mix, along with installing new lampposts along both sides of the drive (there were never any on the west side). In addition, the drive itself is being removed and repaved.

“The more you look at it today, it’s really not reinforcing that sense of procession and ceremony and arrival to the school,” Mr. Lee said. This fall, 44 trees will be planted along both sides of the drive — 22 American linden (or basswood) and 22 Princeton elms. Eleven new lindens and elms will be planted around the circle. “We sorted through quite a few combinations of species and landed on these two,” Mr. Lee noted. One factor that went into the decision was how the trees would grow over time. “The trunk of the elm opens up into these graceful, arching branches,” he said. “The linden does not

do that — it maintains what we call the central leader — the main trunk — and then the branches start arching and creeping out. So they’re not the same, but they have some compatibility in terms of that branching gracefulness.”

Both trees turn yellow in the fall and are the same stature in terms of future size.

“What the landscape will go back to is the early days of the school, when the entrance was fully planted,” Mr. Lee said.

The new trees, however, will be placed a bit farther off the drive, so as to limit the impact of runoff from the drive on them, particularly from salt used to treat the road in winter. The light posts will be staggered so that they’re on both sides but not directly across from each other.

And unlike the existing plantings that follow the line of the Front Circle, new trees will be planted in more of a square around the circle. “Because we discovered that, when you come down the drive, at about the second or third tree from the circle in the allée, you could potentially see the [chapel] tower rising above. So that was really a happy discovery. Once we move the trees outward to frame a sort of ‘room,’ the tower comes into play.”

ALSO INCLUDED in the project was the removal of four tennis courts that sat west of the drive. The six courts across Purgatory Road were also excavated this spring, and the materials was ground and repurposed for the new courts being built along the Lower Drive leading to the athletic complex.

With its care and maintenance of the Main Drive landscape, St. George’s will fulfill at least a part of the hopeful vision of some of our first students — and certainly the vision John Diman had for the Hilltop in the early days of its development.

By May of 1901, St. George’s 34 students, who then lived at the school’s second home, Swann Villa, near the Cliff Walk in Newport, could look across Easton’s Beach and see Old School being built.

When the school opened that fall on the Hilltop, with a student body of 40, there was much optimism and hope that it would continue to expand on what was (and still is) some of the most premier real estate in New England.

Diman had commissioned his cousin, the early 20th century’s well-known Providence architect, Prescott O. Clarke, to design Old School in the style of a Georgian manor house, and care was taken to place this first architectural jewel of the Hilltop in a fitting location on the property. With the future already in mind, the Rev.



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Diman would, the next year, invite Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., son of the man now regarded as “the father of landscape architecture” and who had taken over his father’s practice, to propose a plan for placement of new buildings and plantings. Their correspondence is housed in the Frederick Law Olmsted Papers collection in the Library of Congress.

“HERO DONORS” have been critical to St. George’s growth and prosperity over the last 125 years — and so it was that Diman and his young school had generous supporters from the start. In fact, it was the Newport socialite Jane Parsons Swan who donated the trees along the Main Drive — news first announced in a 1901 edition of *The Dragon*: “Mrs. Swan is going to present the school with trees to be planted along the avenue leading to the new school,” one of the boys wrote. “These will add greatly to the attractiveness of the grounds and approach.”

A generous benefactor of local institutions like Newport Hospital, Mrs. Swan was a parishioner at Berkeley Memorial Chapel, where Diman had been pastor. “She must’ve been a nice lady,” said Archivist Val Simpson, who unearthed another news brief in *The Dragon* about Thanksgiving Break 1901: “Most of the boys left for home Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving, returning on Friday morning. Only eight remained in

the school, and these spent rather a quiet day. Mrs. Swan invited them for Thanksgiving dinner, which they enjoyed very much.”

As the restoration of the Main Drive landscape got underway this summer, new trees were sourced from Northeast nurseries. The best time for planting the new trees will be this fall, according to Mr. Lee, who estimates they will arrive and be planted in late September or early October.

“To work on this beautiful landscape is incredible,” Mr. Lee said. “The allée — how it follows the land forms, the ridge, right on the spine of it that leads to Old School — and then to see from the east-west direction the ocean beyond all these trees framing the view ... To bring that back to its best state will be like art, like a gallery display of the landscape. And that’s very exciting.” ■



### PLANT YOUR LEGACY

As part of our Plant Your Legacy campaign, donors purchased nearly 60 trees that will be planted this fall along the Main Drive or around the Front Circle for \$5,000 each — enduring, visible gifts that will help keep our campus beautiful and sustainable for generations to come. A plaque in the main hall of Old School will honor their generosity.

<< Landscape architect Tom Lee, of TL Studios, created these renderings showing (left) a reimagined landscape surrounding the Memorial Gate at the foot of the Main Drive; and (right) the planting scheme for the updated allée.