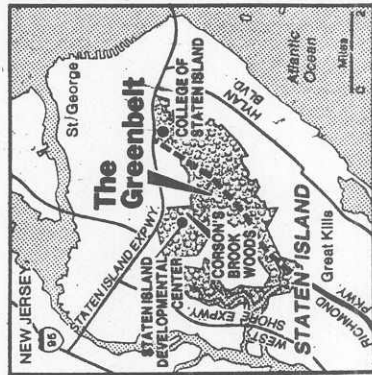


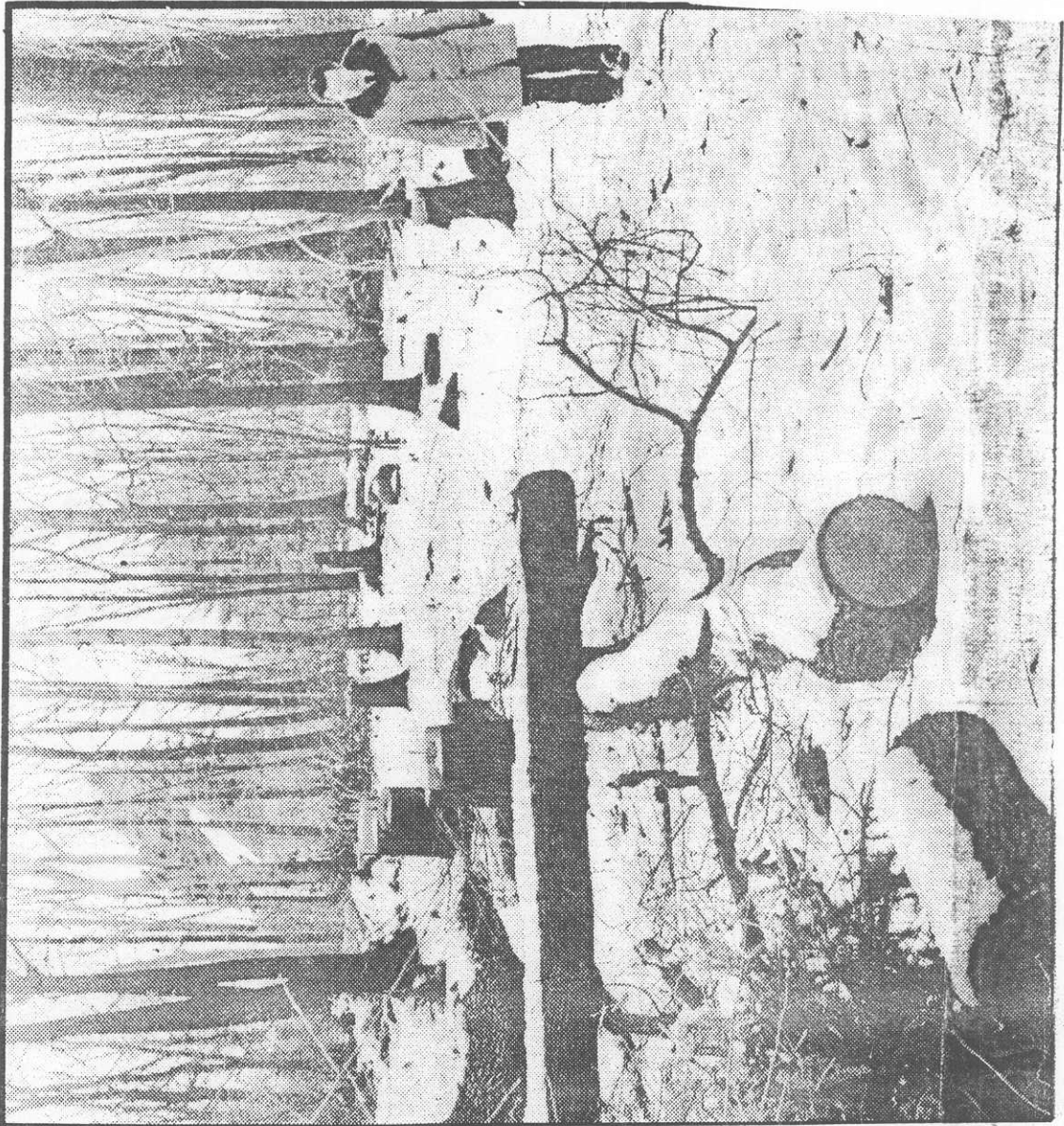
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On S.I., A Fight To Stay Green



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Terence Benbow walking past stumps and felled trees in Corson's Brook Woods, which has been proposed for inclusion in the Staten Island Greenbelt, the city's largest park.



The New York Times/ Jim Wilson

On S.I., Residents Continue Fight to Keep the Borough Green

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Island. Today, those farms are gone, driven out by pollution drifting across the Arthur Kill from New Jersey and by housing developments reflecting growing population pressure.

Since 1980, in fact, Staten Island has grown at a faster pace than any other county in the state of New York — 2.2 percent between 1980 and 1982, according to the United States Census Bureau. Staten Island, the only borough in the city to show growth in the last census, has a population of 365,000, up from 222,000 in 1960.

For many Staten Islanders, those numbers alone make the Greenbelt a precious resource and refuge that must be zealously guarded if the borough is to maintain its character.

"The Greenbelt is like a security blanket, or a purifying boundary," said Judith Berger, who lives across the street from Corson's Brook Woods. "You tell people that they're going to cut down the only thing between their homes and New Jersey, and they say, 'No, thanks!'"

But the exact dimensions of the park seem to be a matter of some un-

certainty, with estimates ranging from 2,000 to 2,500 acres. Richard Buegler, president of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, on the other hand, hopes that the Greenbelt will someday grow to 3,500 acres. The group has urged the city and state to refrain from selling potential parkland to real-estate developers.

"It would be sad, wouldn't it," said Mr. Buegler, "if people came to Staten Island looking for trees and the only indications they could find were in the names of the developments they move into?"

As both parties readily admit, there are no villains in the Corson's Brook Woods dispute. What has developed is not a conflict between right and wrong, but competition between two public goods: preserving the environment and caring for the mentally retarded.

"They are sincere about what they're doing," the developmental center's director, James Walsh, said of his adversaries. "But my responsibility is to my clients."

Mr. Walsh also has an obligation to meet a Federal court order of a dec-

ade ago to eliminate what it called "the inhumane and shocking conditions" prevailing among Willowbrook's patients.

Judge John R. Bartels, of the Federal District Court in Brooklyn, demanded that the institution reduce its population from the 5,300 patients it had in 1972 to 250 by April 1981. Later, he extended the deadline to April 1985. The judge also ordered that patients be dispersed into the community, and Governor Cuomo later pledged to close Willowbrook.

The four group homes planned at Corson's Brook Woods are part of the state's plan to meet Judge Bartels's requirements. Mr. Buegler and the Protectors have suggested several alternative sites, but Mr. Walsh has rejected them as inadequate.

Mr. Walsh also argues that, because the remaining 585 patients at Willowbrook include some of the most severely retarded, he needs more time.

"We are simply not going to be able to meet that April deadline," Mr. Walsh said. "We hope to go into Federal Court sometime in February and

get an extension for a year or so."

What happens to Willowbrook after the mentally retarded are moved out is also a matter of concern to the 11,000 students and 365 faculty members of the College of Staten Island, who find themselves subjects of the same debate about development and preservation.

Ever since the college came into existence in 1976, the product of a merger between Richmond and Staten Island Community Colleges, it has been forced to operate from two campuses three miles apart. For both students and teachers, that has created a host of problems.

New construction at the existing Sunnyside campus, built for 2,000 students but now accommodating 7,000, has also been ruled out because of protests by nearby residents opposed to the noise and traffic that they say would accompany an expansion.

That leaves Willowbrook, which is the preferred site for a new campus of just about everybody associated with the college.

Staten Islanders are very much aware of their status as residents "the fifth borough." They've heard all the jokes, endured all the ribbing by friends and co-workers back what they know as "the city."

And, of course, every now and then there are problems — such as last year at Yom Kippur, when Mrs. Berger and others were driven out of their synagogue during services by poisonous gas leak wafting over from New Jersey.

But true Staten Islanders emerge from such mishaps with a flinty pride in their little island because they believe they are the guardians of one New York's best-kept secrets.

"The overall quality of life is better here than in other parts of the region," said Borough President Ralph J. Lambert. "We still have the open spaces."

DO NOT FORGET THE NEEDIES

By LARRY ROHTER

When a work crew began chopping down three acres of trees at Corson's Brook Woods on Staten Island two months ago, the residents of The Woods, a nine-block cluster of homes just across the road, were stunned. The last they knew, the City of New York had designated Corson's Brook Woods, a tract of land in the Willow Brook section, a "protected area" and recommended its incorporation into the Staten Island Greenbelt, the city's largest park.

But, almost overnight, a prime stand of beeches, oaks, maples and sycamores had been transformed into a collection of stumps — and hundreds of other trees had been marked for felling, with red X's and yellow ribbons. The tree removal, it was soon discovered, had been ordered by the state-owned Staten Island Developmental Center, formerly known as the Willowbrook State School, as the first step in the construction of four group homes for 72 mentally retarded patients.

Corson's Brook Woods is part of the state's Willowbrook school tract, and the action came as the city and residents of the community were negotiating with the state over its future. So an environmentalist group, the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, went to court and, last month, were granted a preliminary injunction by Judge Rose McBrien of State Supreme Court in Staten Island.

The state is appealing that decision. For the moment, though, the cutting has stopped at Corson's Brook Woods.

To Terence Benbow, the lawyer who argued and won the injunction that has at least temporarily halted the state's plans, the dispute is

just one more skirmish in the long struggle to preserve the sylvan character of much of Staten Island. "This year's battle," he calls it.

Mr. Benbow is a veteran of many such battles, dating to the mid-1950's, when he came to Staten Island from Michigan via Yale Law School.

Mr. Benbow had originally been attracted to Staten Island because, he said, he wanted

"something with a little green space around it" for his three young children. Over the years, that desire has sent him to court against Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller, Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Secretary of the Army.

There was, for instance, a successful, decades-long effort beginning in the 1960's to prevent the city from imposing a grid pattern of streets that, he said, was fine for the other boroughs but ignored the ponds and wooded knolls that dot the Staten Island landscape.

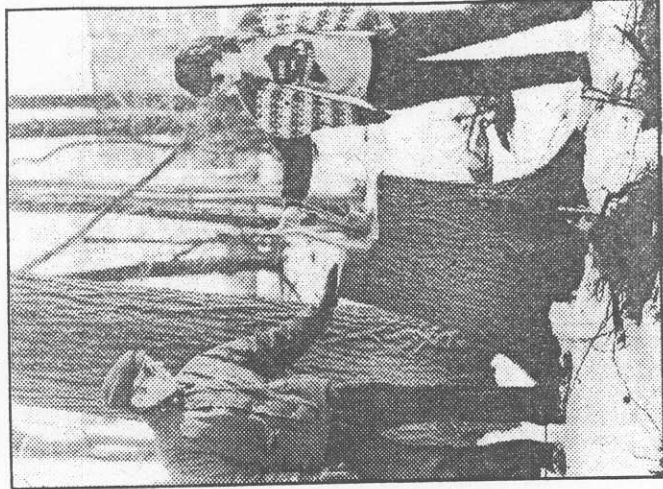
Later, Mr. Benbow took part in the successful drives to head off construction of Richmond Parkway and to establish the Gateway National Recreation Area.

"What we've had to do is make sure that those things which made Staten Island attractive to people in the first place are not lost in the fight over building and development," he said. "You don't want to destroy the very values to which you seek access in the process of developing them."

One lesson Mr. Benbow said he had learned from his experience is that no victory is permanent. Though the Richmond Parkway was, for all practical purposes, abandoned years ago, city maps continue to show the "proposed" highway cutting across Latourette and Willow Brook Parks.

If there is one rallying point for the residents of Staten Island, it is the sanctity of their Greenbelt. More than twice the size of Central Park, the Greenbelt is a small wilderness composed of several parks and wildlife preserves, stretching across the center of Staten Island and lending the borough much of its small-town flavor.

Before the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge opened in 1964 and brought traffic and new settlers, the rural flavor was provided by the dairy farms that operated throughout Staten



Judith Berger and her husband, Dr. Joel Berger, standing near tree stump in the woods across from their house.

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