

Emerson Hill group home a bit scruffy?

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You'd never know there's a group home in Emerson Hill, neighbors say, except that the state doesn't maintain the premises.

The pretty house at 8 Diana Trail isn't going to crumble tomorrow from disrepair, but as one resident of the hilly wooded street said, without proper care, "you're going to see the deterioration of value of a piece of property."

Parts of the stone wall that brace the steep front lawn are crumbling, and a few saplings have made their way through cracks. A carpet of matted leaves lies beneath unkempt shrubs, and some of the wooden steps leading to the house are falling apart.

Traditionally, residents of neighborhoods where group homes are proposed fight to keep the facilities out, fearing that the mentally retarded residents will disrupt neighborhood calm. In Emerson Hill, the group home's residents are accepted as neighbors. The state probably would hear no complaints from the community if officials maintained the property the way neighbors maintain their own homes.

James Walsh, director of Staten Island Developmental Services, which runs the home for four mentally retarded or developmentally disabled adults, said yesterday the property will be brought up to snuff.

The state had contracted out

the maintenance work that has been neglected, he said.

"Either (work crews) are lying, saying they've been there, or they're coming and not doing anything," said a neighbor who asked not to be identified. "Certainly nothing has been done."

Though a neighbor reported that state workers showed up last Friday and carted away bags of leaves, that's the first sign of maintenance he's seen in some time. There are still plenty of leaves left to be carted and more work to be done.

"The place hasn't been painted in years," a neighbor said. "Why not clean it and maintain it? You wouldn't even know anyone's been living there. I have no complaints with the residents and staff."

"My complaints are with maintenance and repairs. Residents can't control maintenance, and the staff is there to care for the people living there."

Over the years, when neighbors have complained to the Willowbrook developmental center and the state Office of Mental Re-

tardation-Developmental Disabilities, they've been pacified with promises that the matter would be looked into.

Walsh said only two complaints about maintenance have come to his office in the four years he's worked there.

He promises visible results "within the week." His staff will take over the contracted work and fix the wall and give the premises "a good cleaning." He noted that the home meets all state and federal safety codes.

"Most of the complaints (from neighbors)," Walsh said, "really are about parking." When the staff changes shifts or inspectors stop by, the winding road gets congested, he said. His office is "looking at ways to relieve that."

There was a time, neighbors say, when the state needed no prodding to take care of the residence — before it was a group home.

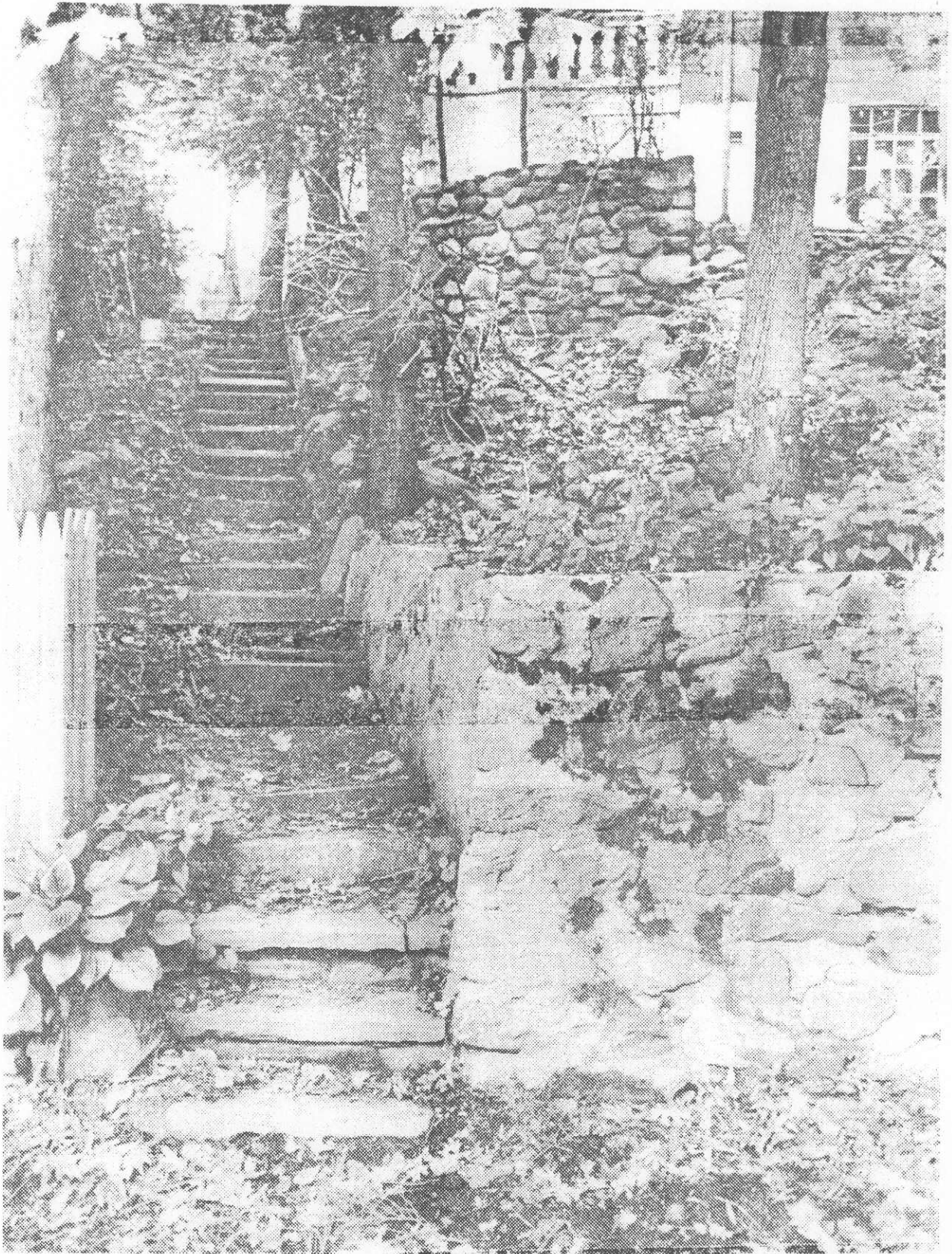
The state bought the house for \$50,000 in the summer of 1968 for Dr. George Jervis, director of the center now known as the Institute for Basic Research in Developmental Disabilities. Jervis paid the state \$150 rent to live there.

Dr. Henry Wisniewski took over the director's position and house in 1976.

"When the house was the director's residence, the state maintained it," said a neighbor. "Then Dr. Wisniewski bought a home on Ward Hill" and the house became a group home in 1978.

Across the Island, Walsh said, the state currently operates 23 group homes.

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ADVANCE PHOTO/SHIRLEY GUMBS

The yard, steps and stone wall at 8 Diana Trail, Emerson Hill, need attention to preserve the group home.

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