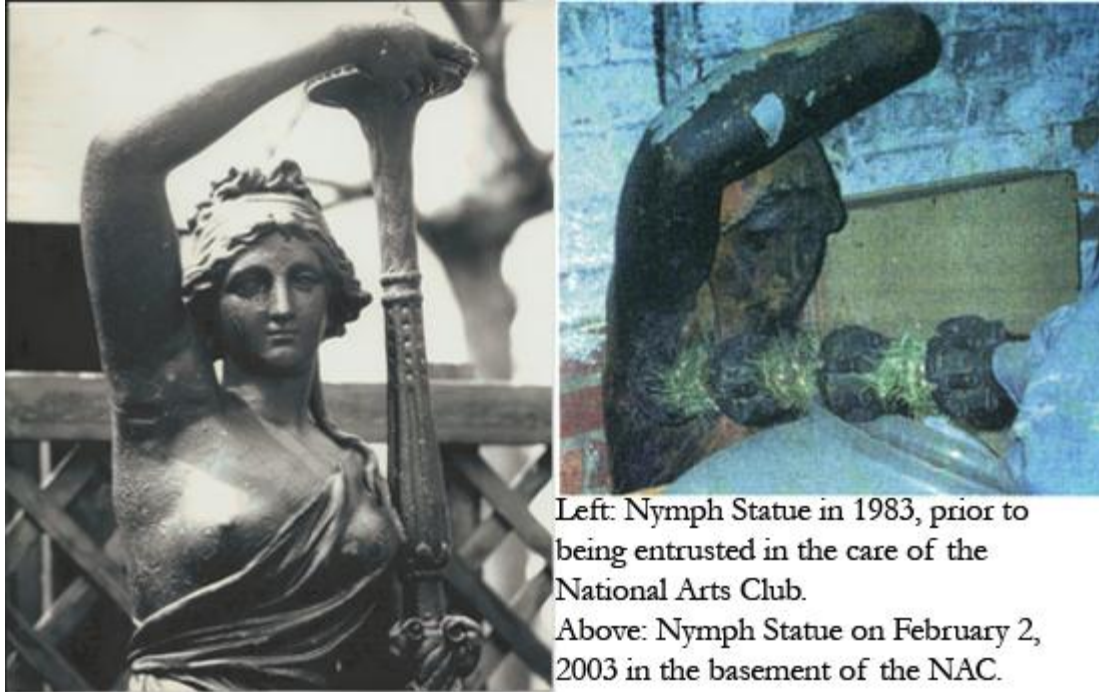


## Town & Village

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### Park trust wants closure on nymph



Left: Nymph Statue in 1983, prior to being entrusted in the care of the National Arts Club.

Above: Nymph Statue on February 2, 2003 in the basement of the NAC.

By Sabina Mollot

Following a statement by National Arts Club President Dianne Bernhard to *Town & Village* that a historic statue, last seen badly damaged in the basement of the club, had been gone for years, the owners of said statue are hoping for some closure.

The zinc statue of a water nymph was technically the property of 39 Lot Owners that surround the gated park, as the owners had paid for its creation in 1844. Meanwhile, the current Lot Owners, represented by five trustees, are now hoping to receive some insurance money for the lost statue. They are also planning to get a new sculpture by a well-known artist placed in the park, at least on a temporary loan basis.

James M. Clark, Jr., chairman of the Trustees of Gramercy Park, said earlier this week, "We're trying to get a resolution. We have a fiduciary duty to protect the belongings of the Trustees."

Complicating matters, however, is that the Trustees don't know what the statue is actually worth, saying only that it was priceless in terms of its historical value. What no doubt drove the value down though was that the statue was damaged after being

removed from its place in the park in 1983. In their haste, the workers removing it cut the statue off at the ankles. Then, adding insult to injury, the nymph was hidden away in the National Arts Club's basement until at least when it was captured on camera in 2003. The photo, which was printed in this newspaper, showed the statue leaning against a wall, stuffed under other items, with an arm partially cut off.

Some sources now believe that the statue was intentionally tossed shortly after the release of the photo by then-NAC President Aldon James or someone working for him. Additionally, Trustees believe the reason James wanted the statue gone in the first place, despite his offer to the trustees to have it restored, was to make room for another sculpture, Fantasy Fountain. That piece of artwork, created by artist Greg Wyatt, depicting frolicking animals, was placed in the park on the club's 85th anniversary, which was held shortly after the nymph was removed.

The removal of the nymph had actually been done with the blessing of the park's Trustees, in the belief the statue would eventually be restored and returned to the park. The statue, which is believed to have been sculpted by Frederick Macmonnies, was placed in the park in 1866. Once the centerpiece of the park, it was moved 50 feet east when the Edwin Booth statue was placed in the center of the park.

According to Clark, the nymph was insured in 2003, when it was spotted in the club's basement, although it's unclear if it was insured at the time it was taken out of the park.

At this point, before the Trustees can move forward to see if they can recoup their loss, Clark said they'll need someone from the club to state - in writing - that the nymph is gone.

"We can't go to the insurance company until we have written proof of loss," said Clark, "and the insurance company isn't going to want to hear this whole saga.

"We're not trying to be vindictive," Clark added. "We just need a resolution, and we can't get a resolution until we can get the National Arts Club to say we don't have it, it's not here."

The reason for its missing status, he said, isn't necessary in the statement. When reached for comment by T&V, Bernhard issued the following statement:

"To the best of the club's knowledge, the statue was removed from the club a number of years ago. We have cooperated fully with the investigating agencies regarding this and all matters being scrutinized.

"Additionally, we have spoken with the Gramercy Park Trust and they are aware of this and we are happy to be working with them again in a cooperative and neighborly manner."

Though there are no plans to remove or relocate Fantasy Fountain, the trustees are attempting to get a new statue by "a major American artist" into Gramercy Park, though they first have to get the green light from the Landmarks Commission.

According to Clark, the statue is a valuable piece of art that gets lent to people around the world by the foundation that owns it.

## **Background information on the Gramercy Park Nymph Statue**

The nymph statue, which stood in Gramercy Park for 117 years, was erected atop a fountain in the center of the Park in 1866. Its total height, fountain and statue, was 18 feet and was the Park's focal point for the next 40 years. After the Edwin Booth statue replaced the fountain and statue in 1909, the nymph was moved 50 feet east within the Park in 1918 to a stone plinth with a reflecting pool.

Then, on June 14, 1983, there was a ceremony inaugurating the 85th Anniversary Year of the National Arts Club with the presentation to Gramercy Park of "Fantasy Fountain," a bronze sculpture by Greg Wyatt. Aldon James was then a Vice President of the NAC, Chairman of the NAC Placement Committee (to place the Wyatt statue in the Park) and the Committee for Arrangements.

According to a June 5, 2003 Town & Village article written by T&V Christopher Hagedorn and reporter Linda Barr, Stephen Garmey, "a noted historian whose book on Gramercy Park is considered a benchmark work," explained the nymph statue "was deteriorating with the weather and needed to be re-cast, so the Trustees [of Gramercy Park] agreed to have it taken down." He further stated, "It was taken down with all the intentions of erecting it again once it was recast. You are dealing with a landmark which is not allowed to be destroyed."

In 1983, just before the NAC 85th Anniversary ceremony, the nymph statue "was taken down unceremoniously by workmen who broke it off at the ankles in their haste to remove it from its concrete plinth," with the intention of "recasting" the statue.

According to Garmey, "It was taken in a wooden box to the basement of the National Arts Club in 1983. The last time I saw it was 10 years later and it was exactly as it had been when it was originally placed there." "It would be very unfortunate if it has been

damaged," said Garmey. "They [the arts club] agreed to keep it safely - it's their responsibility."

The 2003 T&V article notes sources in stating "the historic statue was taken out of its protective wooden box years ago, while entrusted to the arts club's care. Several floods in the arts club's basement have immersed the statue in water, and the club's leadership left it propped up against a wall." The article also stated that "other critics of the National Arts Club and its president, Aldon James, are pointed in what they see as the willful destruction of the statue." An anonymous source told T&V, "We think the disintegration is more willful than anything else. It has happened under the watch of Aldon James [President of the National Arts Club], and he should be held accountable. This is a heavy piece of zinc - it doesn't fall apart easily." Garmey agreed, saying "It could not have fallen to pieces by itself - neglect is not going to damage it, it won't rot."

The nymph was last seen (and photographed) in badly damaged condition in the north end of the club's basement in 2003, missing both her hands and her scepter.

Although former Trustees of the Park had requested the return of the statue from James and were unable to get it back, the newly appointed Trustees in 2003, again tried, giving James a June 30, 2003 deadline for the return of the statue. All attempts failed.

According to a recent report, a NAC staff member recently claimed that, some years ago, they were asked to bring the statue up to the NAC Pool Room, and the next morning it had disappeared.