



VIEW OF THE F.O.J. SMITH HOUSE, PORTLAND, OIL ON CANVAS BY HARRISON BIRD BROWN (1831-1816), LENT TO PMA BY THE CITY OF PORTLAND, 1977. PHOTO: DIANE HUDSON.

*Smith Castle, or Forest Home, was built by Congressman Fog Smith, who, together with his pals Samuel Morse (inventor of the telegraph) and Ezra Cornell (founder of both Western Union and Cornell University), designed and laid the world's first underground telegraph cable right here, in Baxter Woods.*

# Wondrous, Forgotten Smith Castle

ITS LAWN WAS ALL OF BAXTER WOODS, BETWEEN FOREST & STEVENS AVENUES.

Story By Herbert Adams

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Baxter Woods is 30 acres of surprising greenery tucked between Stevens and Forest Avenue, two of the busiest traffic

arteries on and off the Portland peninsula. It is a memorial to James Phinney Baxter, the six-term mayor of Portland and founder of the Portland park system. And it is something more, says Tarling: "It's a serious challenge."

There's the rub. This is more than a city park; it is also a civic wilderness, managed but not manicured, a ragged refuge of

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VIEW OF THE F.O.J. SMITH HOUSE, PORTLAND, OIL ON CANVAS BY HARRISON BIRD BROWN (1817-1915), LEFT TO PIA BY THE CITY OF PORTLAND, 1977. PHOTO, DIANE HUDSON.

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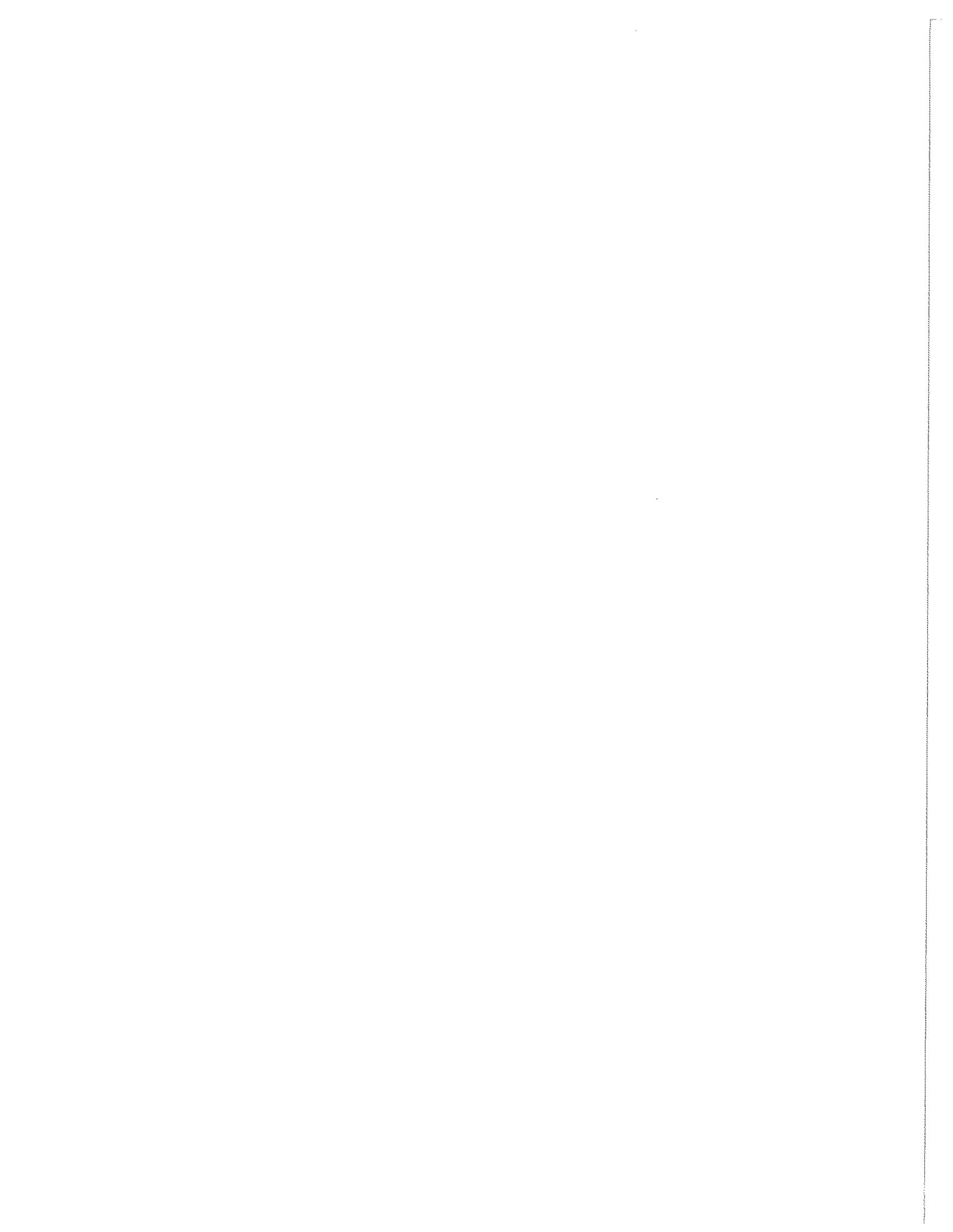
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woods in the middle of the largest city in Maine, a forest whose value shifts as the city around it changes. It is a legacy from the past for the future—if it can survive the present.

On a late summer day Tarling parks his truck by a small field beside Stevens Avenue, behind two granite pillars marking an ancient entrance. A stand of Red Pines, planted by the Baxters, fills part of the field, and everywhere the undergrowth of Baxter Woods is slowly working its way toward the avenue.

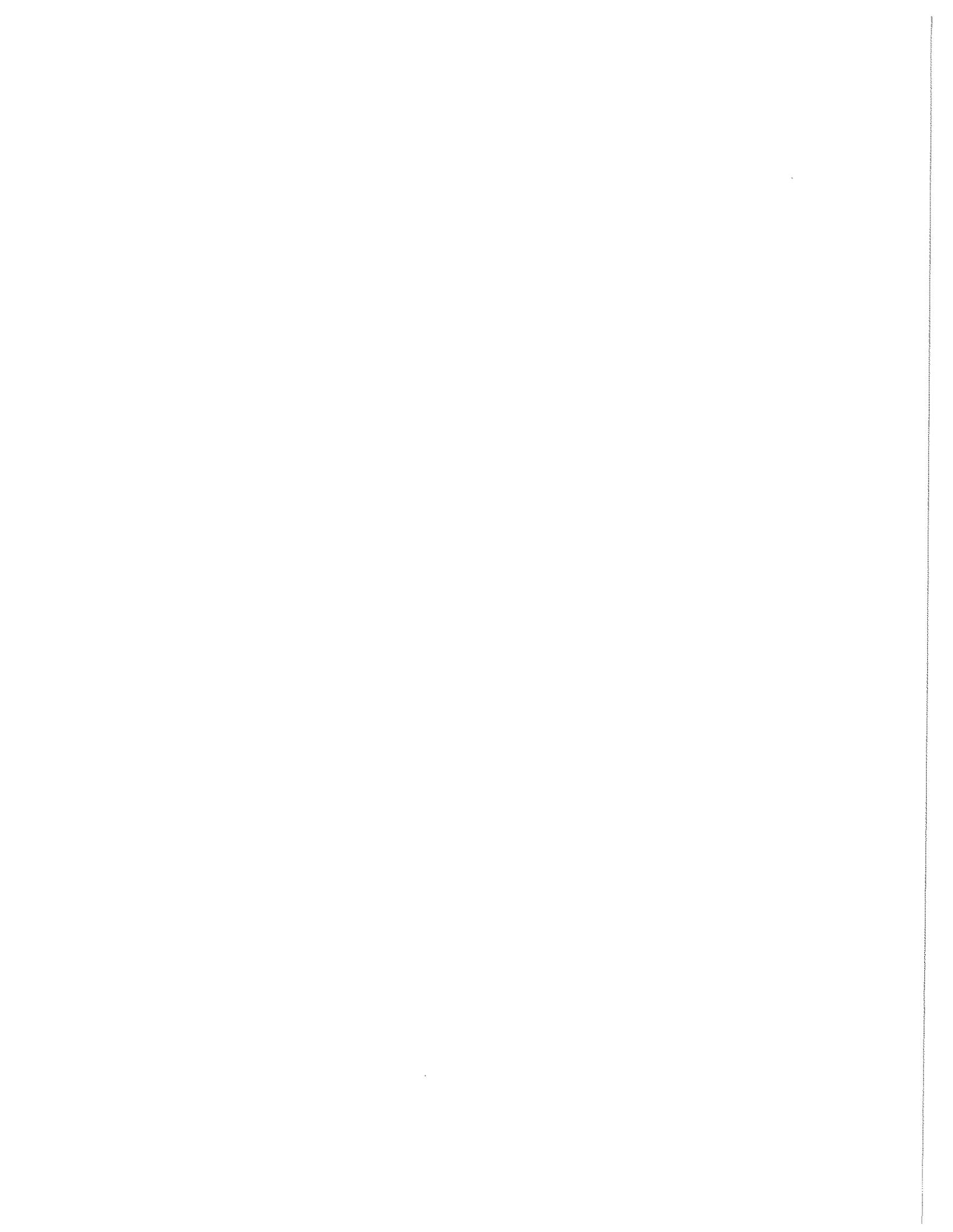
A branching pathway beckons walkers into the woods. Five minutes inside, Tarling passes through small clearings ringed by massive white oaks and maples alive with birds. Ten minutes more and he walks in a silent cedar and hemlock forest, dark and damp, where all sights and sounds of the city vanish. Here, one of Portland's oldest hemlocks stands, so big two men can barely embrace it. Nearby, he pauses before a mossy boulder, atop which a massive pine and huge hemlock have grown tall only a foot apart, their thick roots entwined below, their crowns sharing the same sky high above.

"Woods meant something different when the Baxters gave us this 50 years ago," he says. "We're governed by the same order they gave for keeping Mt. Katahdin — 'Forever Wild.' What role does a city forest play today?"

The Baxters, who valued both history and posterity, would have approved of the question — and carefully, left us no answers.

**B**axter Woods' brush with history came at the hands of a politician, a portrait painter, and a plow salesman.

The politician was Francis Ormond Jonathan Smith (1806–1876), congressman, editor, and owner of hundreds of acres between Woodfords Corner and Morrills Corner in what was then part of Westbrook. In the 1830s, on 70 choice acres between Stevens and Forest Avenues, Smith built a wooded estate worthy of an English gentleman, with pillared entrances on both avenues and graceful gravel driveways that embraced, deep in the woods, a domed mansion with attached greenhouses and the largest private library in Maine. "Deer parks, artificial ponds, shady drives, and delightfully cool walks made the place an earthly paradise," says one account, "Everything was arrayed in regal style, and Smith in the



years of his prosperity lived the life of a king."

Smith called his estate "Forest Home"; locals called it "Smith Castle" and had other choice names for Smith himself.

Brilliant but vindictive, F.O.J. Smith – known to all as "Fog" Smith, for his initials and his principles – was a powerful orator and sharp lawyer who served three terms in Congress (1833-1839) with a shrewd eye open for the sure thing. As Chairman of the Committee on Commerce in 1837, Smith witnessed portrait-painter-turned-inventor Samuel F.B. Morse demonstrate his new marvel, the electric telegraph.

**I**mmediately, Smith recognized the world-changing potential of an instant communication machine, and became Morse's chief partner and promoter. Smith sent Morse to the quiet of Forest Home to work out the marvel's many problems, one of which was how to lay working cable underground. Enter traveling plow salesman Ezra Cornell, who one day found editor F.O.J. Smith on the floor of his office at the *Maine Farmer*, scribbling out cable diagrams with chalk. Cornell quickly designed a plow and reel that cut a deep furrow and laid within it a cable of copper wire encased in soft lead pipe from an endless coil – and with this, Morse, Smith, Cornell and a team of oxen successfully laid the world's first underground telegraph cable in a field at Forest Avenue beside dusty, rural Stevens Avenue.

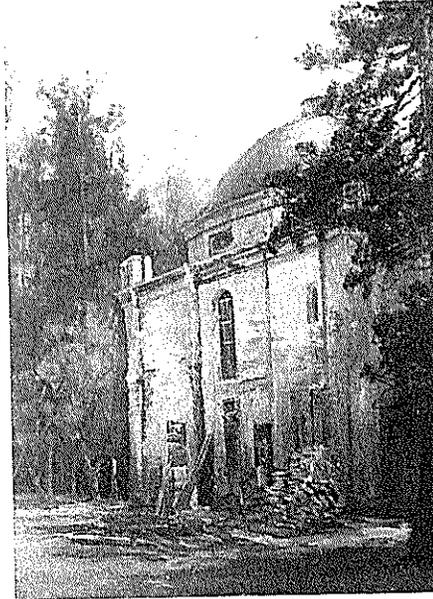
Amazingly, as late as 1901 a witness to this moment of history was still living. "I remember and watched (Morse) in the large field directly across the street," the elderly George M. Stevens, who lived nearby as a boy, told the Portland Sunday Telegram. "Morse would plow up and down the field, and lay his wires underground... He was only a common stranger in the town, while few knew what he was trying to invent, and if they did, paid no attention to him, thinking his idea impossible."

The telegraph, of course, soon made Morse world famous. Ezra Cornell, later one of the founders of Western Union, left his fortune to found Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. And Smith, jealous, bedeviled Morse with lawsuits until the end of his life. "I thought I found a friend," Morse wrote years later, "Instead I found an arch-fiend."

Smith died at Forest Home, in debt and filing lawsuits to the end, on October 14,

1876. Soon after, Mayor James Phinney Baxter bought Smith's decaying mansion and overgrown estate.

Far from the city of Portland, it was a green, peaceful place, remembered Mrs. C.P. Anderson, who as a little girl in 1898 used to live in Forest Home's gate house by the frog pond and pillars on Forest Avenue. "The land and buildings were owned by Mr. Baxter, who was a wonder-



*The domed library, featured in this painting by Harrison Bird Brown, boasted the largest private collection in Maine.*

ful man. Our rent was only \$2 a month, (which) today wouldn't pay the rent for one day in a slum district," she wrote in 1965. "My playmate and I knew where every wildflower grew in those woods.

"The 'Gates House' got its name from the large iron swinging gates at the front entrance. The iron foundations are still there but the gates and the house have been gone for years.

"The pond is still there and many a night I've been lulled to sleep by the musical entertainment of the frogs. We had no radios, television or even phonographs in those days and those frog recitals were really beautiful to my childish ears, and even now I prefer 'frog music' to jazz any day... This all took place in 1898, B.L. - Before Litterbugs."

Mayor Baxter developed little of this far-flung estate, selling several acres on its northern edge to the Roman Catholic Diocese (today the site of the St. Joseph's Parish School) and on its southern margin laying out seven streets which today still bear the names of his seven children: Clinton, Hartley, Madeline, Florence, Mabel, James, and Percival. After Mayor Baxter's death in 1921, it was to Percival

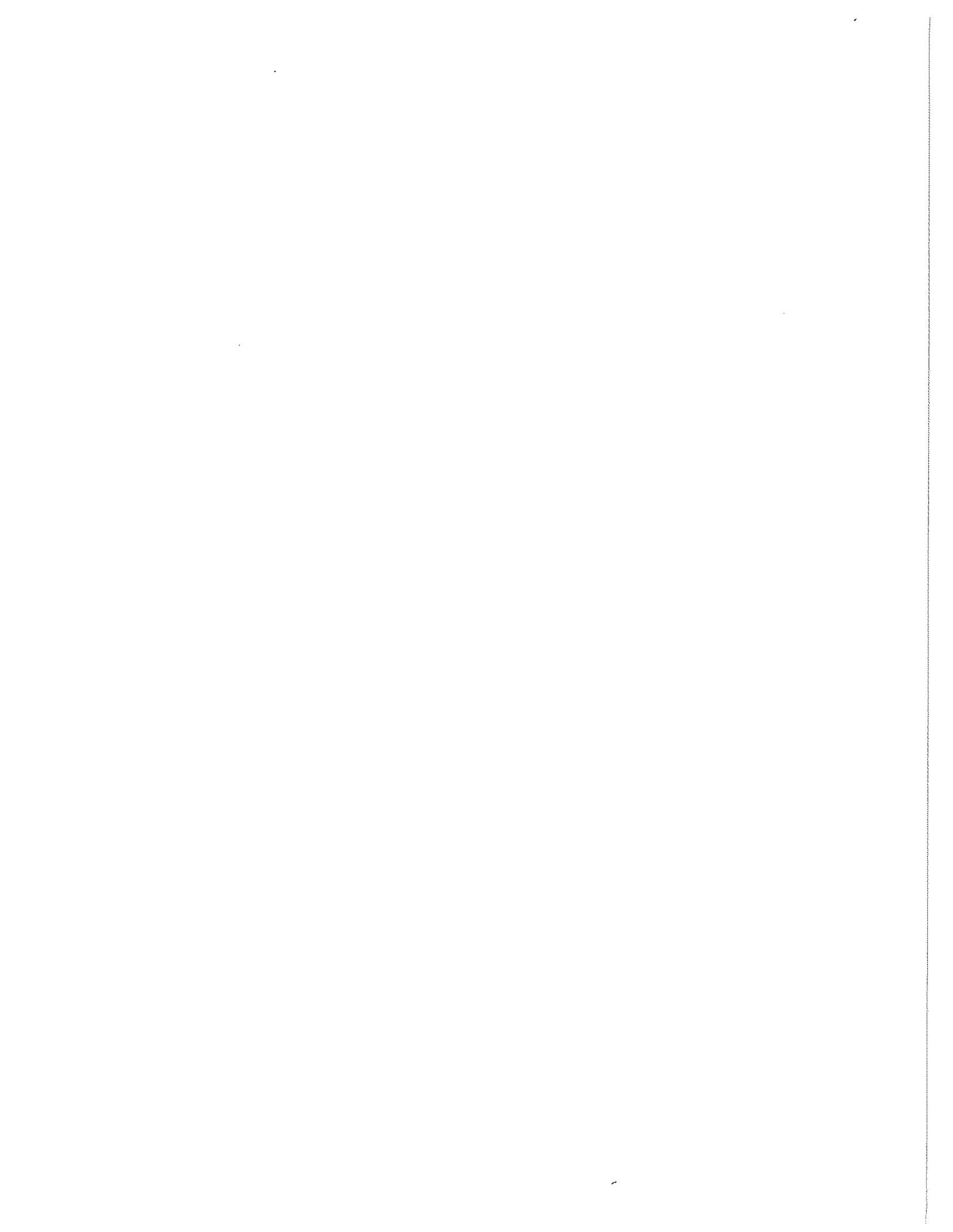
Baxter, the mayor's youngest son and later Governor of Maine and builder of Baxter State Park, that the legacy fell of preserving this wooded retreat as the bustling city of Portland spread ever outward down the once-rural reaches of Forest Avenue.

So far-sighted as to see a day when this might be the last forest left on Forest Avenue, Gov. Baxter opened the woods only to passive recreation, and well into the 1930s the woods were known a "Baxter Bird Sanctuary," with nature trails maintained by the Cumberland County Audubon Society and the Longfellow Garden Club, and a Boy Scout "Activity Area" on Stevens Avenue and a Girl Scout area on Hartley Street.

**I**n April 1946, nearing his seventieth birthday, Gov. Baxter presented the 29.5 acres of Baxter Woods to the people of Portland as an outright gift and "As a Municipal Forest and Park... forever," adding there would be "No cement walks, only paths and trails, and there are to be no cultivated flower beds – it already is a wild flower garden – and it is to be a sanctuary for birds." In simple ceremonies on August 16, 1946 – the same day Baxter dedicated the 16-acre "Baxter Pines" behind Deering High School – the Governor dedicated a memorial boulder and bronze tablet deep in Baxter Woods, surrounded by members of the city council, the Longfellow Garden Club, and Council Chair Helen C. Frost, Portland's first woman mayor.

It was a typically generous gift, bound by Baxter's typically generous – and pointed – provisions, which he carefully elaborated in deeds to the city and placed in bronze on the memorial tablet itself. Baxter Woods were to be for "Public recreational and educational purposes... forever"; public streets, paved paths, horses, cars, and all vehicles (except for city maintenance) were "forever excluded therefrom"; only fallen or dangerous trees could ever be cut; the ornamental gates from "Forest Home," stored by the city, were to be remounted at either the Forest or Stevens Avenue pillars; and the woods were forever to be known as "MAYOR BAXTER WOODS" – the capitalization was his – in memory of his admired father.

In time all these simple terms became serious challenges a society, and the booming city of Portland, changed. The iron gates from "Forest Home" were lost and never remounted (their fate remains



something of a minor city mystery) and in 1962 Baxter himself threatened a lawsuit to halt city plans to shave a strip off Baxter Woods to widen Forest Avenue. In 1966 vandals destroyed the original bronze memorial tablet and Baxter himself, nearly ninety, personally replaced it. In 1971, two years after Gov. Baxter's death, the Deering Lions Club installed Maine's first "Braille Trail" in Baxter Woods, an elaborate nature trail with child-high tablets for the blind. Vandals completely demolished both trail and tablets within two months.

By the 1970s and 80s news articles often featured Baxter Woods as a haven for trash, vandalism, and vagrants, and even the simplest signs bearing the name "Mayor Baxter Woods" were quickly demolished.

"Times change, and not always for the better," says Jeff Tarling, pointing out one of the broken "Braille Trail" posts still standing in the shadows, like a silent witness to the way things could be. Baxter's memorial boulder still stands, on a small flagstone plaza completely covered with broken glass. Its bronze plaque is still in place, heavily battered.

The vandalism saddens Tarling, but he is most worried about keeping alive Gov. Baxter's wish that the woods be used "for educational purposes." Tarling can quote Baxter's words by heart, and clearly takes them personally. Every fall and spring he leads classrooms of students from Longfellow Elementary and other city schools on nature walks through the woods. "All the kids want to know what animals live in here, and the boys always look for salamanders," he says. Deep in the woods the kids always fall silent, cut off from sight and sound of the city around them. One wide-eyed little girl whispered, "This is the first big trees I've ever seen," he says, smiling.

Back in class they draw Tarling pictures and write poems about Baxter Woods. "Planting seeds in the next generation," he calls it, the most important crop for any urban forester.

Only a depression in the ground today marks the site of "Forest Home," and its cut granite foundation blocks are scattered along the pathways, cools seats on a warm afternoon. Of all Portland's several "country gentlemen" estates, like "Bramhall," J.B. Brown's vast and long-vanished estate atop Bramhall Hill, these woods are the last example left. In fact, "Baxter Woods and the back edge of Evergreen Cemetery

are probably the only uncut old woods left in Portland, our last chance to see what the old peninsula was like," says Tarling.

"The challenge today for an urban forester is to keep these rare public spaces public, despite what some of the public does to them," he says, pocketing a handful of trash.

Tarling takes heart in the growing number of neighbors and regular dog walkers who keep an eye on the woods and occasionally organize mass cleanups. As he speaks, a jogger with a golden retriever in tow stops to talk about some litter he had collected for pickup. "So old Gov. Baxter was a dog walker too?" he laughs. (Tarling nods; Baxter favored Irish setters.) "Then he's O.K. in my book. As if he wasn't already, for these woods," and with a wave he is off.

Other owners with pets pass and wave as Tarling pauses in a small grassy clearing where a few ancient fruit trees, their bows thick with bees, nod in the humid breeze. A few minutes more and he is back by his truck in the field where Samuel Morse once worked with telegraph cable, and the sounds of Stevens Avenue, the city, and his ringing cell phone close in.

"Places like this are an incredible legacy, and an incredible challenge," he says. "Budgets are always tight, even in good times, and the balance between public access and preservation is a real fine line. It's not so much the money that makes a difference, it's the people."

"For me, the key is to be true to Baxter's provision for 'public education,' as much as recreation. Remember, his words wanted both nature and people — 'So that people undisturbed may enjoy its quiet and its beauty and so that children may learn about nature, the ferns, flowers, trees and bird.' There's the challenge."

As if on cue, a mother and two young children stop to talk, en route to the woods for their regular afternoon walk. "What's good about the woods?" says her bounding son. "They're really neat, and my dad saw a deer in there once."

"Yeah, they're cool, and I get to see birds and flowers," adds his sister, "and then my mom takes us for ice cream!" And with that they're off, backs to the low afternoon sun, racing their long shadows into the different world of Baxter Woods.

Tarling nods. The Baxters, he bets, would have liked that.

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