NEWPORT — Last week’s wind and rain storm that knocked out power for thousands of residents also razed one of the most historic trees in the state, a 135-year-old Yezo spruce in the Frederic Law Olmsted Park and Arboretum on Bellevue Avenue.

The park and arboretum is on the site of the former Stoneacre mansion built in 1885 for banker and railroad owner John W. Ellis. Frederick Law Olmsted, America’s first and most famous landscape architect, designed the grounds. Olmstead went on to design many of the nation’s parks and grounds, including Central Park in New York City, The White House and the campus of Stanford University.

The mansion was demolished in 1963 and the grounds were abandoned until 1998, when Judy and Laurence Cutler purchased the property, along with the neighboring Vernon Court mansion for their National Museum of American Illustration. The Cutlers quickly realized the historical importance of the property, restoring it and opening a park to honor Olmsted.
According to Laurence Cutler, “We located Olmsted’s original plan for the property. Many of the trees still on the property were obtained from Dr. George Rogers Hall’s North Farm Nursey in Bristol, Rhode Island.”

Dr. Hall was born in Bristol in 1820 and earned a medical degree in 1846. He went to Shanghai, China, to be a doctor, but became fascinated with newly discovered trees and shrubs of the Far East. In 1862, he left medicine and moved back to Bristol to create a nursery and import plants from Japan. North Farm is now the site of a condominium development.

Many of the species Hall helped to introduce to American gardeners have become popular landscape plants, including Japanese Yew, but not Yezo Spruce (Picea jezoensis, also known as the dark-bark spruce).

Native to northern Japanese and Russian islands, as well as Korea, the slow growing evergreen proved difficult to grow away from the ocean and never became a popular landscape plant.

Over the past 135 years, the Frederic Law Olmsted Park and Arboretum’s Yezo spruce had grown to a height of 74 feet. In 2015, it was named a Helen Walker Raleigh Rhode Island state champion tree. The following year, the park was accredited as an Arboretum by ArbNet, the international accrediting organization.

According to Laurence Cutler, “In gardens, Yezo spruce usually stays healthy for about 40 to 60 years, after which its health begins to fail. The one in the park was clearly a ‘senior citizen.’ Several years ago, Jim Rugh, our arborist, noticed the tree was declining and we began to plan for the day when the tree would have to be replaced.”
Finding a replacement proved difficult. After an extensive search, a small Yezo spruce was located at a wholesale nursery in California. This was planted in an out-of-the-way area on the museum’s grounds.

“We were hoping to grow the small spruce for a decade or more before we needed to replace the champion tree,” museum co-founder Judy Cutler said.

That plan was derailed by the February storm, and the fallen tree soon will be removed. The question the grounds staff faces is when to move the replacement tree into the park. This likely will happen in the fall, but it will be decades before visitors to Bellevue Avenue again will see a towering Yezo spruce in the Frederic Law Olmsted Park and Arboretum.