



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Michael Sabatino, Mike Spano, Stephen Byrns and Shelley Mayer stand at the Vista Overlook on July 12.

## Hudson River vista restored at historic gardens

By John Scuderi

YONKERS — Not that long ago, a visit to Untermyer Park and Gardens might have begun and ended at the Walled Garden, which is described in a pamphlet as “the finest Persian garden in the Western Hemisphere.” Visitors might have missed the magnificent staircase leading down from the northwest corner of the Walled Garden.

Now, the latest in a series of projects to restore the beauty of the National Register of Historic Places site has been completed: trees removed, stonework repaired, plantings added. As a result, the park again offers a breathtaking view of the river.

The Vista, culminating at the bottom with the Vista Overlook, was dedicated

during a brief ceremony on Wednesday, July 12. Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano, New York State Assembly member Shelley Mayer, and Yonkers City Council Minority Leader Michael Sabatino presented a proclamation to Stephen Byrns, president of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, whose fundraising and restoration efforts are bringing the Untermyer property closer and closer to its former glory.

“What a spectacular next part of the restoration of this park. When you stand at the top of those stairs, and you look down and you look out, the view... leaves you speechless,” Sabatino said at the ceremony, after which champagne and caviar were served.

The plot of land that prominent lawyer Samuel Untermyer intended to

be preserved for the public’s enjoyment upon his death in 1940 currently covers about 43 acres. Like the westward hills in Hastings, Dobbs Ferry, and Irvington, the Untermyer estate becomes a steep slope as the Hudson River comes into clearer view.

Untermyer, a child of German-Jewish immigrants who led the nonsectarian Anti-Nazi League in the final decade of his life, found the inspiration for The Vista when he visited the Villa D’Este, a Renaissance garden in Lake Como, Italy. He hired architect William Welles Bosworth to design the landscape. “This Vista, which was completed a century ago this year, was Samuel Untermyer’s favorite feature of the gardens,” Byrns told the small group of supporters at

the dedication. “...Some people called this the single most monumental garden feature in America.”

The Vista Overlook is anchored by two monolithic marble columns, which, according to Byrns, are 2,000 years old and date to ancient Rome. “These are the greatest ancient columns in the Western Hemisphere,” Byrns said.

The Vista includes 20 series of steps, seven of which are just two steps apiece. The sides of the staircase are adorned with 2,200 hakonechloa plants, Japanese fountain grasses that were donated by Ira Feinberg. Feinberg, owner of The Plant Group, a wholesale perennial nursery in North

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The view from the top of the staircase

## Untermeyer

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Franklin, Conn., grew up in Yonkers. “I came here with my now-wife in 1963, and even back then I said, ‘They should fix this place up.’ So I was so happy to see it was being fixed up and I wanted to be part of it,” Feinberg recounted.

The website TripAdvisor ranks visiting Untermeyer No. 4 on its list of the top 200 things to do in Westchester. “I recommend everyone I know to come here when they come to Yonkers for the first time,” Mayer said. “This is a very major tourist destination in the county.”

Samuel Untermeyer opened his gardens to the public on a weekly basis during his lifetime. Upon his death, he wished for that practice to continue, but the site, which became a city park in 1946, proved too expensive for state or local government to maintain.

When Byrns, a Riverdale resident, formed the nonprofit Untermeyer Gardens Conservancy in 2011, he was a successful architect for whom Untermeyer was a labor of love. The restoration of the estate has evolved into his full-time job.

Byrns was eager to share the credit with Timothy Tilghman, Untermeyer’s head gardener. “He is the secret to the whole thing,” Byrns said. “He is the total package. He is incredibly knowledgeable with plants, he has a great artistic eye, he’s as strong as an ox, and incredibly dedicated, very passionate.”

Tilghman, whose previous experience in public gardening includes a stint at Wave Hill in the Bronx, was hired in 2011, the first of seven gardeners (three full-time, four seasonal) to join Byrns’ staff. When Samuel Untermeyer lived at Greystone, the 99-room mansion just south of the park grounds, he employed 60 full-time gardeners. Untermeyer’s property once exceeded 150 acres, and Byrns said the conservancy is negotiating with St. John’s Riverside Hospital, its next-door neighbor to the north, to reacquire some of that land. The mansion was demolished in 1948.

“There’s so much potential for this property, it’s really staggering,” Tilghman said. “Again, 43 acres, considered one of

America’s finest gardens in the early 1900s. How to bring that back, bring that vision back, is a big challenge.”

Byrns’ plan is to renovate one feature at a time. The work started with the Walled Garden, then continued with the Temple of Love, a rocky formation of cascading waterfalls completed last year. On the trail below the Vista Overlook stands the Gate House, which was once on the verge of collapse but is now half-restored as a ruin. The remaining work, Byrns said, includes removal of graffiti from the exterior of the Gate House, turning the satanic-like graffiti on the inside into graffiti art, and planting a garden in the ruin.

“The Gate House, because it is on the Old Croton Aqueduct and serves as an invitation into Untermeyer Park from the recreational trail... that is a priority,” Tilghman said.

Byrns hopes that repairs will begin next year on the Temple of the Sky, a circular structure at the edge of the swimming pool.

The pool itself, a mosaic, will be restored as a reflecting pool and will cost about \$2 million. “That’s a huge signature element of the garden. What we’re talking about is trying to get grants from the City, from the State, and privately, because that’s going to be our biggest project by far,” Byrns said.

Spano praised the public-private partnership at Untermeyer, and said the city will help with the financing of the pool restoration. Mayer, whose District 90 includes much of Yonkers, is working to secure a state grant to help restore the Rock Garden, Byrns said; Byrns hopes to begin that project next year.

Funding is already in place for a gazebo. Also on the to-do list are the Rhododendron Walk — “Samuel Untermeyer had the finest collection of rhododendrons in the country, and they’re all gone,” Byrns said — and the Color Gardens.

“It’s not necessarily a very linear progression,” Tilghman said. “It all depends on exactly how the donor money comes in, and with the feasibility of the horticulture around it. But our intent as far as we can see, for at least the next five to 10 years, is to work on every aspect of the garden, to bring it back to the vision that Untermeyer had.”