

Sunday  
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# Sunday Life

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The Journal News

## Splendor on the Hudson



A sculpture of a sphinx atop a pair of marble columns inside the walled garden at the park.

TANIA SAVAYAN / THE JOURNAL

After decades of neglect, Untermyer Park in Yonkers is returning to its former glory

By Bill Cary  
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Even in the dead of winter, there's a clearly visible magnificence about Untermyer Park, the 43-acre crown jewel in the city of Yonkers' public parks system. The harsh afternoon light turns the four marble columns on the soaring sphinx sculptures by Paulanship a pearly white, and the long shadows play magic with the 18-foot-tall crenelated walls of the old Greek Garden. With no leaves on the trees, the vistas down to the Hudson and out across the river to the Palisades are clear-eyed — and simply breathtaking.

While the gardens come alive with waves of color and texture in spring and summer, in January you can see the majestic bones of Samuel Untermyer's former 150-acre estate, which held one of the finest private gardens in the country in the early years of the 20th century. In its heyday, this estate that was known as Greystone had 60 full-time gardeners and 60 greenhouses supplying plants for the gardens and the 29-room mansion. A flower show in the fall of 1939 drew 30,000 visitors to Greystone in a single day.

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Steps lead to the vista garden. TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

### Meet Samuel Untermyer

Who was the highly successful lawyer who lent his name to Untermyer Park?  
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## COVER STORY

## GARDENS: Restoring a Yonkers gem



A pair of Roman columns made of Cipollino marble frames the view from the lower part of Untermyer Park across the Hudson to the Palisades. TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

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Since Untermyer's death in 1940, these once-grand gardens have drifted into various stages of decay and outright ruin. And now, a new nonprofit group called the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy has begun the long fight to bring the park and its gardens back to life.

"These are incredibly important gardens," says Stephen Byrns, chairman of the conservancy. "It is my belief — and no one has disputed me on this — that these are the greatest Persian gardens in the Western Hemisphere." Other well-known Persian gardens include the Taj Mahal in India and the Alhambra in Spain.

"I call this America's greatest forgotten garden," he adds. "So many people — and important people in the gardening world — know nothing about it."

To give the restoration a kick-start, last summer the conservancy hired a full-time horticulturalist, Timothy Tilghman, to begin the process of planting new beds and containers and ripping out 70 years worth of weeds, overgrowth and neglect. Most recently, Tilghman was the gardener at Rocky Hills, Henriette Suhr's 13-acre garden at Rocky Hills in Chappaqua, and before that he worked at the 28-acre Wave Hill public garden in Riverdale and as a senior garden editor at Martha Stewart Living.

"Right away, we knew he was far and away the best person for the job," Byrns says. "The headway he's made already is nothing short of spectacular."

Marco Polo Stufano, the retired horticultural director at Wave Hill and a highly regarded plantsman nationwide, has been brought on as a horticultural adviser. He's been working with Tilghman, on a pro bono basis, to help devise a planting and design scheme for the gardens.

And the Cold Spring-based Garden Conservancy is serving in an advisory role, working with the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy to restore the gardens and to plan for their ongoing management and preservation as a one-of-a-kind public garden. The Untermyer conservancy has also formed a partnership with the Yonkers Parks Department, and the city's Teamsters work crews frequently lend a hand on big jobs.

For now, Tilghman and Stufano are concentrating their efforts on what's known as the Greek Garden, a spacious walled garden that sits near the park's entrance on North Broadway. (Despite its name, it's really a classic Persian garden, with a monumental gateway, two long intersecting water channels and low bubbling fountains.)

Last summer, Tilghman ripped out most of the weedy 350-foot-long border garden on the western side of the walled garden and replaced it with a mixed border of shrubs and perennials, including hydrangea, roses, upright yews and smokebush. The gardens on either side of the water channels were planted with sweeping drifts of annuals, mostly sweet potato vines that crept into the water and softened the hard edges. In the fall, he replaced the annuals with Japanese hollies that will look good year-round.

And Stufano has been doing much more than simply giving advice from afar, Byrns emphasizes.

"In summer, Marco was there almost every day," he says. "He was out buying plants — he was *weeding* — and he was planting with Timothy."

"It's fantastic for us to have him," Byrns adds. "And it's very nice for Marco to do it."

The Untermyer gardens were designed by William Welles Bosworth in

*"This place is amazing to begin with — the architecture and the spot and the history and the potential."*

TIMOTHY TILGHMAN, horticulturalist



Horticulturalist Timothy Tilghman near the canal beds inside the walled Greek Garden. The Untermyer Gardens Conservancy hired Tilghman last summer to begin ripping out 70 years worth of weeds and neglect and planting new perennial and shrub borders along with beds of colorful annuals. TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS



In the fall, the beds of annuals along the canals were replanted with evergreen Japanese hollies. TIMOTHY TILGHMAN/UNTERMYER GARDENS CONSERVANCY



Designed as a classic Persian garden, the walled area of the park features two long intersecting water channels. TIMOTHY TILGHMAN/UNTERMYER GARDENS CONSERVANCY

1916, a few years after he created the gardens for John D. Rockefeller Sr. at Kykuit in Pocantico Hills, in the same Beaux Art style of landscape design. But Untermyer, a wealthy New York attorney, wanted something even bigger.

"It was the best private garden in the whole Hudson Valley," says Byrns, who first fell in love with the Untermyer gardens in the 1990s when a group of Yonkers residents fought a losing battle to prevent the adjoining (to the north) St. John's Riverside Hospital from taking over some of the old gardens to build an on-site nursing home. "Untermyer created a garden that was three or four times grander than what Rockefeller did at Kykuit."

"Just look up the Hudson River at all the great gardens," he adds. "None could hold a candle to this, none was as ambitious as this."

And unlike all the other landed tycoons and robber barons, Untermyer opened his gardens to the public, usually every Tuesday throughout the 1920s and '30s. So there's a long, rich history of Yonkers and Westchester residents claiming this as a beautiful public space.

As part of his garden plan, Bosworth designed the walled garden to include several imposing architectural features, including a circular classical temple that overlooks a now-empty mosaic swimming pool, an amphitheater at the north end and those sphinx sculptures by Manship, who is best known for his gilded statue of Prometheus at Rockefeller Center.

Outside of the walled garden, most of the original planting beds have disappeared. There were several rock gardens, a rose garden and six color gardens that tumbled down to the Hudson — each was planted with a single color of flower. And there were old carriage trails winding down to the river that Tilghman has begun to uncover and restore.

"It's like an archeological dig in there," says Byrns, who now lives in nearby Riverdale. "Already Timothy has uncovered a major rock garden. It's like digging for gold — it's very exciting to bring these back."

Tilghman heartily agrees. "This place is amazing to begin with — the architecture and the spot and the history and the potential," he says.

"There's a lifetime of work here," Tilghman adds. "I'm thrilled to be here, to have a chance to start something from the ground up."

Meanwhile, the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy is looking for more money to keep the restoration on track. In 2011, it raised \$100,000 to pay for plants and tools and Tilghman's salary, and board members hope to raise another \$150,000 this year.

"But I don't want to be limiting," Byrns says. "It's also conceivable that we'll get a gigantic grant — and then we'll really take off."

## IF YOU GO

Untermyer Park is at 945 N. Broadway in Yonkers. Excluding city holidays, the walled gardens are open to the public from 7 a.m. to dusk Mondays to Fridays and on weekends from noon to dusk April through November and most Saturdays from December to March. The rest of the park is open from dawn to dusk every day.

For more on the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, visit [www.untermyergardens.org](http://www.untermyergardens.org) or contact Stephen Byrns at [sbyrns@untermyergardens.org](mailto:sbyrns@untermyergardens.org) or Timothy Tilghman at [ttilghman@untermyergardens.org](mailto:ttilghman@untermyergardens.org) or 914-512-0436.

## COVER STORY

## Meet Samuel Untermyer

A partner in the law firm of Guggenheimer, Untermyer & Marshall, Samuel Untermyer was said to be the first lawyer in America to earn a \$1 million fee on a single case.

He was a highly successful trial lawyer who was famous for his cross-examination skills, says Gray Williams, the author of "Picturing Our Past: National Register Sites in Westchester County," which was published in 2003 by the county historical society.

"He became rich representing corporate clients and investing in their enterprises," writes Williams. "At the same time, he was deeply involved in 'good government' causes, such as opposition to monopolies and support of honest business accounting."

He was instrumental in establishing the Federal Reserve system and was an influential Democrat and ally of Woodrow Wilson.

A Jew, he was also an important critic of anti-Semitism and an early and eloquent opponent of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, says Williams, who lives in Chappaqua.

Untermyer was born in Virginia in 1858 and moved to New York City after the Civil War.

In 1899, he bought the Yonkers estate known as Greystone at auction, after it had been tied up in litigation for years among Samuel J. Tilden's heirs.

Greystone was built in 1868, at a cost of \$225,000, by John T. Waring, a Yonkers hat manufacturer who went broke a few years later.

Tilden, a former governor of New York who lost the ever-so-close 1876 presidential election to Rutherford B. Hayes, bought Greystone in 1879 and lived there comfortably until he died in 1886. Hayes built elaborate greenhouses and stables and spent some \$500,000 to enlarge and improve the estate, according to a 1940 article in *The New Yorker*, "The Boutonnieres of Mr. Untermyer."

Untermyer was even more passionate about horticulture and set about creating a truly world-class garden on the estate.

He was particularly fond of orchids, growing more than 3,000 varieties in his 60 greenhouses, according to *The New Yorker* article. His favorites were the *Odontiodas*, and he wore a specimen of this group in his buttonhole every day, "generally changing his boutonniere three or four times in 12 hours." His chauffeur would drive down to Manhattan around noon each day with a damp box of fresh orchids as replacements.

To find the best gardeners for his estate, Untermyer would send an agent to the docks to meet arriving ships, espe-



*Untermyer tried to leave his estate to the state, the county of Westchester or the city of Yonkers, but no one wanted it without an endowment to pay for its upkeep.*

Greystone was built in 1868 by John T. Waring, a Yonkers hat manufacturer, and then torn down in the mid-1940s after falling into disrepair.



Samuel Untermyer

cially those coming from England, according to Steve Byrns, the chairman of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy.

"He would go down to steerage and say, 'Are there any gardeners who need a job?'" he says.

Untermyer died in 1940, and his 29-room mansion fell into disrepair and was torn down soon after World War II, Byrns says.

He tried to leave his estate to the state, the county of Westchester or the city of Yonkers, but no one wanted it without an endowment to pay for its upkeep. In 1946, Yonkers agreed to accept part of the property to create Untermyer Park.

Bill Cary

## What makes this a Persian garden

The formal gardens that William Welles Bosworth designed for Samuel Untermyer are classic Persian gardens, which typically feature a walled enclosure with a large gateway into the garden.

Inside the walls, the Untermyer garden features two long channels of water that intersect at a central basin. The walled area symbolizes paradise and the four water segments symbolize the four rivers of paradise, says Stephen Byrns, the chairman of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy. The four rectangles of land defined by the channels symbolize the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) or the four directions (north, south, east and west).

Persian gardens, which date to 2000 B.C., were originally contemporary with Zoroastrianism, Byrns says, but later became associated with Islam in the seventh century.

As Islam spread, so too did the Persian style of gardens. Two of the best examples can be seen at the Taj Mahal in India and the Alhambra in Spain. Like the Taj Mahal, the Untermyer walled garden features three walls, instead of the traditional four, to maintain a great view. The west side of the Untermyer garden opens to a spectacular view of the Hudson.



The grand gateway to the walled garden at Untermyer Park. TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS