Splendor on the Hudson

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 Paul Manship 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 are 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.

See GARDENS, Page 48

Meet Samuel Untermyer
Who was the highly successful lawyer who lent his name to Untermyer Park?
Page 58

Steps lead to the vista garden. TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS
GARDENS: Restoring a Yonkers gem

"This place is amazing to begin with — the architecture and the spot and the history and the potential." TIMOTHY TILGHMAN, Architecturalist

Horticulturist Timothy Tilghman near the canal beds inside the walled Greek Garden. The Untermyer Gardens Conservancy hired Tilghman last summer to begin ridding its 79 years worth of weeds and neglect and planting new perennial and shrub borders along with beds of cheerful annuals. TANIA SAVANJIT SUNJDEE (ABOVE)

In the fall, the beds of annuals along the canals were replanted with evergreen Japanese hollies. TIMOTHY TILGHMAN/Untermyer Gardens Conservancy

1946, a few years after he created the gar- den for John J. Rockefeller Sr. at Ky- kuit in Poughkeepsie, in the same Bonn Art-style of classical design. But Untermyer, a wealthy New York fire- fighter, wanted an English landscape of trees and shrubs, grasses and flowers — the English kind of landscape — his gardener Francis Link had done in the 1850’s for him.

"It was the best private garden in the whole Hudson valley,” says Byrun, who first fell in love with the Untermyer gar- dens in the 1960s when a group of Yon- kers residents fought a losing battle to prevent the demolition of the north St. John’s Hospital Hospital, from taking over some of the old gardens to build an on-site nursing home. “Untermyer cre- ated gardens that was three or four times greater than what Rockefeller did at Kykuit,” Byrun admits.

"It was the beauty of the Hudson River at all the great parks,” he adds. “Some people said it was as enor- mous as this. And all the other leading ty- pirates and robber barons, Untermyer opened his gardens to the public, usually every Thursday through the 1920’s and 1930’s. 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, Hornworth designed the walled garden to include several imposing architectural features, including a circular classical temple that overhangs a non-emissory mosaic swimming pool, an amphitheater at the north end and those splendid sculptures by Man- nelli. Who is best known for his gilded statue of Prometheus at Rockefeller Center. But the idea of the walled garden, most of the original planting beds have disap- pears over the years. "There were several rock gar- dens, a rose garden and six color gardens and that was all done in the Hudson, each was planted with a single color of flowers and there were many carriage trails snidng down the river to the Tilghman has a great story to tell.

"It’s like an archaological dig in my mind,” Byrun, who lives in nearby Greenway. "Already Timothy has discovered a major rock garden, it’s like digging for gold — it’s very exciting to bring three back.

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

"There’s a lifetime of work here,” Tilghman adds. "I’m thrilled to be here, and it’s a great privilege to start something from the ground up."

And finally, the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy is looking for more money to keep the restoration on track. Last year, it raised $35,000 for plants and snow and Tilghman’s salary, and board members hope to raise another $155,000 this year.

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

IF YOU GO
Untermyer Park is at 145 N. Broadway, in Yonkers. Excluding city holidays, the walled garden is open to the public the four days a week 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. From now to dusk April through November. "You can get a free tour from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays through late October. The rest of the park is open from dawn to dusk all year.

For more on the Untermyer Gardens Conser- vancy, visit www.undermyer.org or call 914-273-9300 and ask to speak with executive director or contact Stephen Byrun at sthenry@untermyer.org or write to: Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, 145 N. Broadway, Yonkers, NY 10701."
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 Bononières 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 Odontodas, and he wore a specimen of this group in his buttonhole every day, "generally changing his boutonnier three or four times in 12 hours." His chauffeur would drive down to Manhattan around noon each day with a dozen 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, especially 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.