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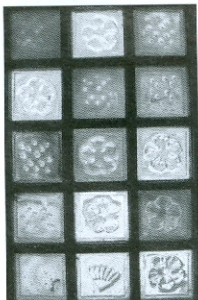
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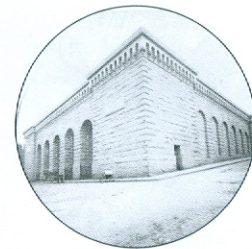
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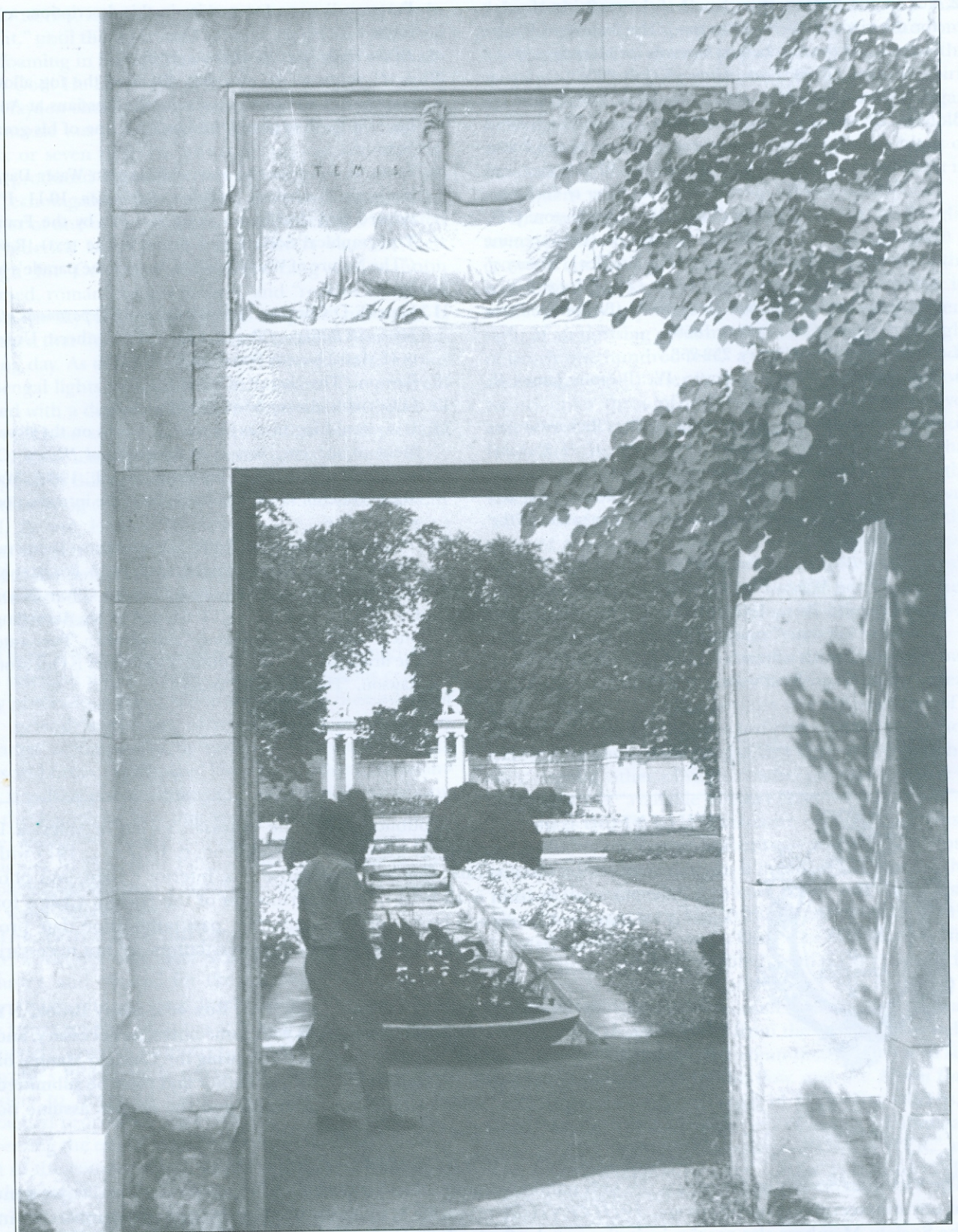
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Graystone, entry to Greek Garden. All photographs courtesy of the City of Yonkers, Department of Parks, Recreation and Preservation.



# Graystone

## From Forest and Farmland to Grand Estate to Public Park

BILLIE S. BRITZ

*One of the many suburban estates that sprang up outside American cities during the mid-1800s, Graystone was renowned in its heyday for its Beaux-Arts-style gardens. Substantial parts of these have been preserved for the enjoyment of the public.*



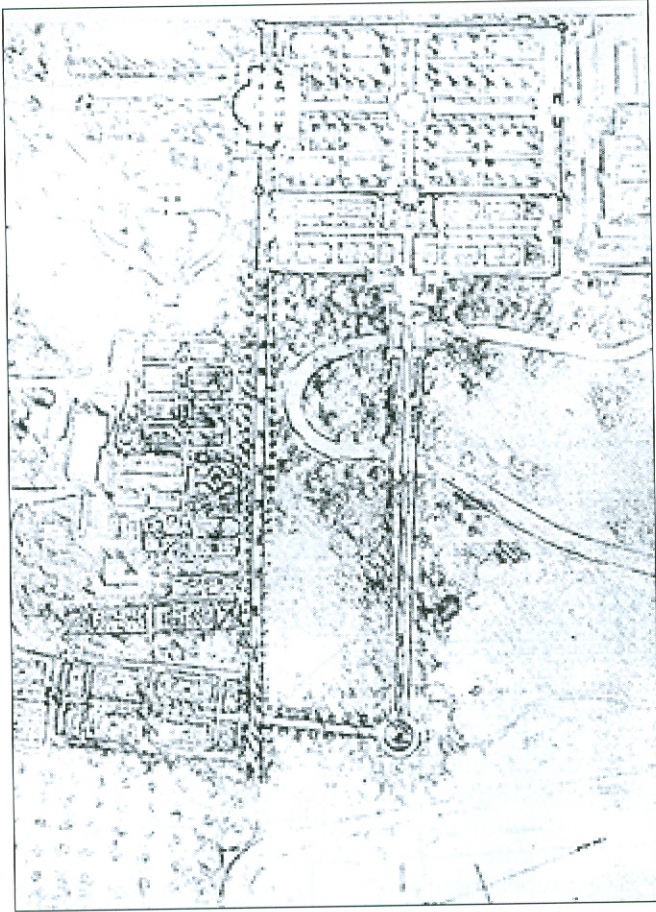
In the mid-nineteenth century, southwestern Westchester County, New York, became a favored location for wealthy Manhattan businessmen and professionals who wished to live outside the city. With excellent train service and proximity to the metropolis it was a commuter's paradise. Portions of their estates remain in the area.

In 1899 Samuel Untermyer bought one of these estates, in Yonkers. With this purchase he acquired a mansion, approximately 145 acres of land overlooking the Hudson River, a smaller house, stables, greenhouse, and a property known for its pastoral landscape and outstanding floral displays.<sup>1</sup>



*Main house, Greystone (later Graystone), John Davis Hatch, architect. Nineteenth-century photograph.*





W. W. Bosworth garden plan for Graystone, 1914.

The transformation of this particular acreage from pleasant rural land to gentleman's country estate began in 1862 with John Waring, a successful manufacturer who then owned a hat factory said to be the largest in the world. Later during the decade he added acreage to the original purchase and tore down the house on the property, hiring an architect, John Davis Hatch, to design a mansion (reputedly with 99 rooms), stables and a carriage house, which were built of local gray granite. Contemporary descriptions of Waring's mansion do not praise it, claiming it to be heavy, boxy in the manner of mid-Victorian or French Second Empire. Although the mansion was of no significant architectural merit, it did remain the residence of all succeeding owners and provided a lasting name for the estate – Greystone. But in 1876 Waring had financial setbacks that forced him to sell both his hat factory and Greystone.

The property's second owner, Samuel J. Tilden, was an influential political leader – a former governor of New York (1874-1876) and an unsuccessful candidate for President (1876). After his defeat, Tilden retired from his long political career and in 1879 purchased Greystone. Although the estate was originally intended as a summer home, it became Tilden's major residence. He moved most of his household including relatives and servants to Greystone and returned to his home on Manhattan's Gramercy Park only in the winter months.<sup>2</sup>

Tilden's original contract for Greystone was negotiated as a lease of the property with a right to purchase. The property with 63-plus acres of land, mansion, outbuildings and gardens was at one time valued as high as \$327,000, but before the lease expired, Tilden was able to negotiate purchase of the property for a much lower price, \$150,000.

During the short seven years that Tilden enjoyed his estate, he made significant changes to the property. He purchased adjoining land, increasing the estate to 145 acres, changed the name from *Greystone* to the more American spelling *Graystone*, added a sumptuous greenhouse (costing \$75,000), and dotted the land with specimen trees and flower beds placed for visual effects. He also acquired an additional 31.9 acres of land on the east side of Albany Post Road (now Broadway) that he turned into a farm where he cultivated his interest in animal husbandry, raising prize winning St. Bernard dogs, as well as horses, cows and poultry that were shown at local fairs. In total, Tilden spent more than \$244,000 to enlarge and improve Graystone.

Samuel Tilden died in 1886 leaving an estate of more than \$5 million (including Graystone) in trust for the establishment of the New York Public Library and smaller libraries in Yonkers and New Lebanon, New York (his birthplace). His nephews, deeply in debt, contested the will. The ensuing legal action lasted for years, until 1899 when Tilden's will was upheld. With the issue of the will finally settled, Graystone was sold at auction, for \$171,500.<sup>3</sup> The buyer was Samuel Untermyer, who outbid two New York bankers to become the third owner of Graystone. At that time, the *New York Times* reported the property, while by no means in a state of decay, had been allowed to fall into an unattractive condition. It had been neglected ever since Mr. Tilden's death and the beauty of the house and its surroundings was to a great extent spoiled.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after purchase, Untermyer began his crusade to transform Graystone into a showplace. His initial projects included a complete remodeling of the mansion and an upgrading of the outbuildings and landscape. He immediately hired New York architect J. H. Freedlander to head the project and spent



Graystone, Yonkers, New York, reconstructed estate plan as of c. 1920. From *Graystone historic landscape report*, September, 1995, prepared by Landscapes, for the City of Yonkers.





Water channels, Greek Garden.

approximately \$100,000 on his first improvements to Graystone.

The mansion had been unused since Tilden's death and many practical changes were necessary – new plumbing and redesigning and decorating the interior space for the family's use. The improvement project also included elements added purely for aesthetic and luxurious effect. Freedlander designed an elegant white limestone porch on the Broadway entrance and added bay windows to the mansion to alleviate the massive appearance of the building. The main entrance to the estate was also improved.

An article in the *New York Times* reported on the changes to the estate.

Improvements have been made to the stables and the conservatory has been refined and restocked. An oval lawn round which the carriage drive winds, replaces the straight path leading from the Broadway entrance to the front of the house, while the grounds are now illuminated by electric light.

When the restorations were complete, Untermyer, his wife, three children and servants moved into Graystone. In the early years of residency no further extensive changes were made to the house or grounds. These were the years in which Untermyer concentrated on building his reputation as a capable and knowledgeable corporate lawyer, his law practice of paramount concern. For Untermyer was a self-made man; his father died when he was six years old and his mother raised five sons by maintaining a boarding house for immigrants. As a young

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*Greek amphitheater, with Paul Mansard's 1917 statues of sphinxes*

man he worked as an errand boy while attending classes at Columbia University. He began practicing law at the early age of eighteen and was admitted to the bar when twenty-one. Untermyer was quickly recognized as an expert on arranging and financing mergers of corporations. By the time he was thirty he was a millionaire and a nationally known figure.

With Untermyer's reputation and law practice well established (he had become one of the wealthiest lawyers in New York), he began envisioning a lifelong desire – "to have the finest garden in the world." Both he and his wife Minnie were keenly interested in horticulture and the fine arts. They boasted an outstanding collection of orchids and had established several naturalistic gardens at Graystone. But no formal garden plans had been undertaken.

Untermyer claimed that his next, ambitious phase was motivated by his desire to provide a suitable setting for his wife's social events. But his continuous personal interest, involvement and investment in the garden demonstrate his own passion for the subject. Around 1912 Untermyer hired William Welles Bosworth to make extensive plans for Graystone. With this decision two distinctly different garden areas evolved. The first was a wooded, naturalistic sloping landscape containing a winding carriage road and footpaths that probably included work done by previous owners. The second was Bosworth's scheme for a formal Beaux-Arts garden.

Bosworth had a well established reputation from his

previous work. Schooled as an architect at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and later at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he was committed to formality and classicism. Untermyer saw Bosworth's work at Kykuit, the Rockefeller estate in nearby Pocantico, New York, and must have admired it.

Bosworth's original plan for the garden (circa 1914) conforms to the Beaux-Arts tradition of neoclassic formality and unity within the design. He wrote about the site's possibilities and Untermyer's requirements.

The main part of the property lies several hundred feet above the level of the river, whence the ground slopes rather steeply to the river's edge. The present owner of the estate, whose extensive greenhouses testify to his fondness for growing things, wanted a scheme to provide space for the cultivation of all kinds of flowers, fruits, and shrubs, with proper adjuncts in trees, water and architectural effects. But the only place for a garden of this type was the site of a previous garden, i.e., to the north of the existing greenhouses, and at some distance from the house. The contour of the ground seemed to lend itself to a system of two terraces, one a few feet below the other, and as the east boundary of the site is quite near an important artery of travel, a high wall, to give the garden privacy and to cut it off from the noise of automobiles, seemed an essential point of departure in the determination of the architectural treatment.

As Bosworth noted, the garden as proposed was not adjacent to the mansion and did not provide views of the garden from the house. In his scheme the garden was oriented to the Hudson River and the Palisades on the opposite shore. The plan included dramatic pathways from the mansion to the garden, but these were never executed. Untermyer and his wife approved the plan and work must have begun quickly. Photographs confirm that certain areas of the garden were well established by 1916.

Five distinct gardens were included in Bosworth's scheme: the Greek Garden, the Vista, the Color Garden, a rose garden and a vegetable garden. Each had a well defined space that integrated into the total plan.

The Greek Garden was the most dramatic feature of the scheme. It was, and is, a walled garden enclosed on three sides with the west side open to a magnificent view of the Hudson. The walls are extremely tall, made of beige brick and finished at the four corners with octagonal towers, providing privacy and tranquility. The main entrance to the garden area was through a massive limestone doorway with a bas-relief of the goddess Artemis centered over heavy metal doors. Immediately inside the entrance a three-acre plateau was created consisting of two stepped terraces oriented to the river with the main axis parallel to it.

The upper level of terrace is the larger and more formal of the two. It was rigidly laid out in water channels, pools and rectangular grass beds with straight paths in lightly colored gravel. Although the formality of the garden was retained, the beauty within the garden was not neglected. Bosworth wrote of the flower arrangement,



This upper garden is planned with great care and arranged to bring out the beauty of the various flowers, according to their seasons, distributed in regular borders around the walls and along the balustrades, and in great formality near the central beds.

In addition to the flowers, trees and topiary were placed on the grass beds to add verticality and interest. Water jets with colored electric light livened the pools and produced spectacular nighttime displays.

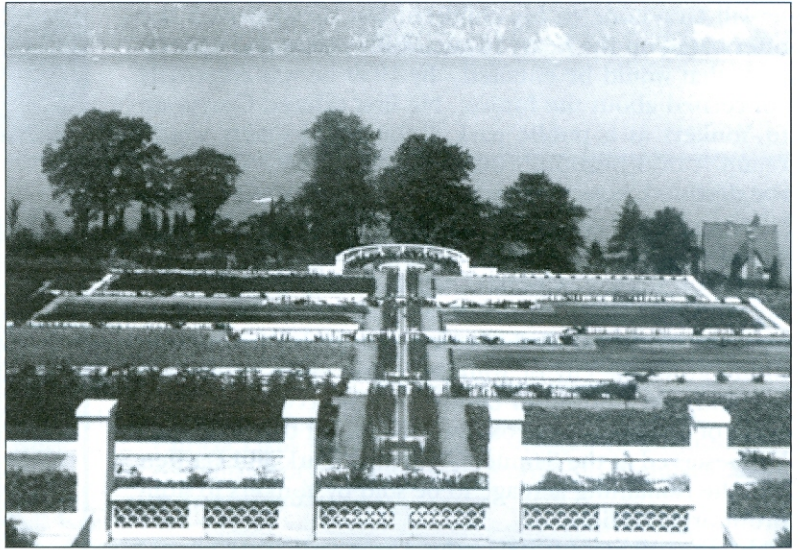
The long north-south pathway was terminated by a colonnade and a small semicircular Greek amphitheatre. It contained four rows of stone benches, a curvilinear marble backdrop and a stage paved with an elaborate mosaic (unfortunately destroyed). Two tall Ionic columns framed the setting. In 1917 Untermyer commissioned Paul Mansard to create two marble sphinxes to top off the columns, enhancing the dramatic effect of the site.

Centered on the river side of the terrace was the architectural prize of the entire garden – the Greek Temple. It still exists, a circular colonnade thirty feet in diameter composed of twelve fluted Corinthian columns and paved with a magnificent mosaic of entwining vines framing the head of Medusa (damaged but extant), set on a marble base elevated above the level of the terrace and extended beyond the perimeter of the garden. Two lions' heads that spilled water into the pool below were situated on the base. The colonnade, open on all sides, was an excellent lookout to the river, the lower landscape and the entire Greek Garden.

Two wide stairways on either side of the colonnade led to the lower terrace. This terrace was narrower than the upper one and not so formally designed. More open space was created by two large grass beds, creatively bedded elaborate design, and perimeter planting beds. Centered below the Greek Temple and between the grass beds was a large pool, square faced in mosaic that contained whimsical sea creatures scattered throughout the design. The pool, eight feet deep, was used as the swimming pool for the estate.

The Greek Garden was an entertainment area. Guests were encouraged to visit the entire estate but the center of large social events was the Greek Garden. It was there that Minnie Untermyer based her annual party for the Poetry Society, attended by some 200 guests. Smaller, more intimate parties included musical theater and dance performances. In the lower terrace the famous Isadora Duncan “girls” gave a dance recital. The Untermyers used their new garden extensively and enjoyed it thoroughly.

The pathway to the Vista Garden was through a pagoda of Ionic columns on the north end of the Greek Garden and it continued to a decorative cast-iron gate that defined the Vista as a separate area. In essence the Vista Garden is a long walkway of approximately 600 feet that descends 100 vertical feet to a circular lookout plateau. Bosworth's treatment of this long narrow space provided a special quality to the area.



*Portion of Terrace Garden, c. 1920.*

The path was bordered on each side by a low stone wall topped by a wide stone coping. Paved in stone set into grass, it contained at irregular intervals low steps that accommodated the sloping terrain. Within the walls a series of Japanese evergreens was planted, and immediately behind the walls deciduous trees were added to further enclose the walkway. These planting created a dark, intimate and cloistered effect that contrasted with the bright, sunlit lookout that terminated the area. The lookout, still there, is a small circular space defined by a limestone railing paved in grass and framed by two large antique Cippolino columns. The columns (extant) were purchased in Europe by Stanford White especially for the space. The Vista Garden was planned as a unique garden experience in its own right, and it also provided a connection from the Greek Garden to the three separate gardens below.

The Greek and Vista Gardens are all that remain of the Bosworth plans. The Color Garden, rose garden, vegetable garden and a later (1916) rock garden fell into ruins in the years following Samuel Untermyer's death, but from the plans we know where they were located. From a few photographs we can envision the opulence of the areas that included stepped terraces, fountain, water channel and sculpture. One of the Untermyer grandsons recalls the tea parties given by Minnie in the Color Garden with each of the areas defined by different flowers of a single color.

Minnie Untermyer died in 1924 and with her death activities and priorities slowly changed at Graystone. Samuel Untermyer loved his gardens and after his wife's death continued to purchase statuary for them and to lavish more flowers and plants on the property. However, the 1920s and 1930s were extremely active times for his law practice; he worked fourteen to eighteen hours a day and it is easy to understand why his gardening interest turned more toward horticulture and away from the planning and execution of large projects.

As early as 1928 Untermyer had expressed his desire



to will Graystone to his children, but they rejected the offer based on the heavy responsibility, taxes and upkeep costs that would be entailed. By 1939 he was extremely concerned about the future. He first offered Graystone to Yonkers as a public park if the municipality would retain it in a beautiful, dignified condition. The offer was declined, however, because of potential maintenance costs and the loss of property tax revenues. He next approached New York State, but this offer was turned down for similar reasons. When Untermyer died on March 17, 1940, his will left Graystone to New York State and provided that if the state refused the property it would go to the city of Yonkers. After years of negotiation with the Untermyer family, the city accepted seventy acres of land west of Broadway, sixteen of those acres to be preserved as the Samuel Untermyer Park and Garden and the remaining acreage to be sold by Yonkers to non-profit organizations.

In the spring of 1941, the Untermyer family auctioned off the contents of the Graystone mansion, greenhouse, the remaining gardens, and the vast collection of orchids and artwork. But not all items were removed from the formal gardens; large fountains and statuary remained in place but were destroyed by vandals in the following years. The mansion was torn down in 1948 and the grounds suffered an overall deterioration during the 1950s and 1960s. The property became a detriment to the city and the neighborhood, a hangout for adventurous children and ruffians looking for excitement.

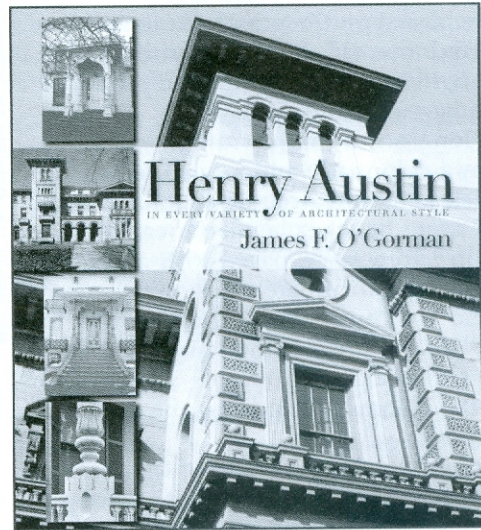
A new approach to the gardens began in 1970 when the city of Yonkers began to appreciate the property's potential and revised its approach. A slow clearing of the land (with volunteer help), a restoration of the remaining architectural elements and the replanting of selected garden areas has created an unusually beautiful park. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places, recognized as an excellent example of a Beaux-Arts garden reflecting lifestyle of the wealthy in the early estates of the area.

#### NOTES

1. The historical data in this article is taken from the historic landscape report prepared by the firm Landscapes, commissioned by the City of Yonkers, New York, Department of Parks and Recreation, September 1995.
2. Tilden's Manhattan residence is now the National Arts Club.
3. This is equivalent to approximately \$5,000,000 in today's dollars.

Maintained by the City of Yonkers, the Samuel Untermyer Park and Garden is open to the public all year during daylight hours. On summer weekends, the Untermyer Performing Arts Council presents free musical events and other offerings. See [cityofyonkers.com](http://cityofyonkers.com) and [untermyer.com](http://untermyer.com).

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