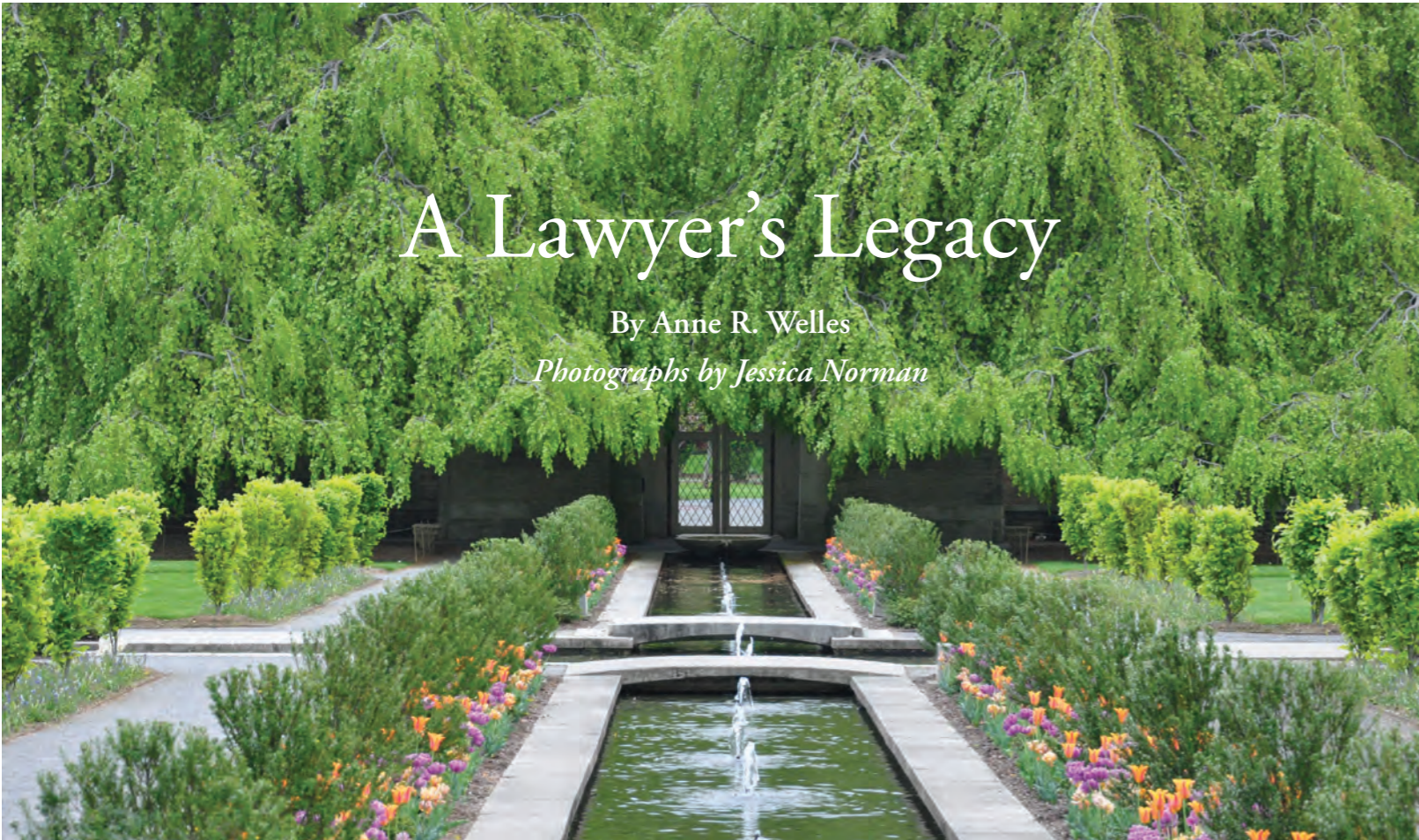


# A Lawyer's Legacy

By Anne R. Welles

Photographs by Jessica Norman



A Beaux Arts garden captures the zeitgeist of early 20th-century America.

New York's Hudson River Valley is home to many fine examples of landscape gardening from the Country Place Era (c1880–1940). By the beginning of the 20th century, America's metamorphosis into a modern industrialised nation had produced a class of rich and powerful self-made men. Their estates were the last word in Beaux Arts design, and none more so than Samuel Untermyer's property, Greystone. For the modern visitor, standing in its walled garden evokes the lavish living of that bygone era and the infinite promise of the modern age.

Greystone is now a public park named for Mr Untermyer, a notable attorney and civic reformer. Since his death in 1940, the parks department of the City of Yonkers has been tasked with restoring and maintaining this elaborately landscaped property for public use. Over the years, some of the gardens and landscape features have been obscured by untamed vegetation or sold off and lost forever. Thankfully, many of the finest elements do remain and, with the help of the newly formed Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, work is proceeding to identify and plan for the restoration of much of Mr Untermyer's pleasure grounds.

In 1899 Samuel Untermyer purchased the Greystone mansion and property from the estate of former New York State governor Samuel Tilden. Sited on the east bank of the Hudson River, it commands dramatic views of the Palisades,

cliffs that tower more than 500 feet (152m) over the river's opposite shore. Untermyer wanted Greystone to be a showcase. For powerbrokers of the day, Beaux Arts design conveyed the stature and tradition they associated with the aristocracy of England and the Continent. Blending styles as diverse as Italianate and Oriental, Baroque and Classical, the architecture and landscapes of this period reflected their owners' social aspirations.

Untermyer first focused on improvements to the Greystone mansion before turning his attention to the grounds. He added numerous luxuries to the Gothic-style residence made of the distinctive, steely grey granite that gave the property its name. These included a Turkish bath and an indoor swimming 'tank' – on the second storey, no less. Samuel Untermyer was an avid horticulturalist and a connoisseur of orchids, which he grew himself in the Greystone greenhouses. This may have motivated his desire for his home to be surrounded by lush gardens, but it is also likely that he was keen to outdo his famous neighbour, John D. Rockefeller whose estate, Kykuit, lay a few short miles to the north of Greystone.

Rockefeller had first employed Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park, to lay out his grounds, and then, from 1906, William Welles Bosworth (1868-1966). Bosworth, primarily an architect, had trained at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's architecture

programme and the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, after which he worked for several prominent firms, including Olmsted's. His career encompassed a wide range of commissions from institutional and commercial buildings to the grounds and residences of East Coast magnates.

Rockefeller held Bosworth in the highest regard and would later assign him to the restoration work he funded at Versailles and Fontainebleau after World War I. So it is easy to understand why Samuel Untermyer decided, in 1915, that Bosworth was the perfect man to design the grounds at Greystone, which he envisioned would be "the finest garden in the world".

Bosworth's design called for a series of garden rooms. Each garden was distinct, but functioned as a part of the whole in how it suited the site and incorporated the majestic setting of the river. Bosworth felt that the topography of the property, and its proximity to a well-used roadway, required a terraced approach to the design and a high wall to ensure privacy. He was thus inspired to create an Indo-Persian, or Mughal-style, garden for the first garden room.

There is a sense of mystery as one ventures within the walls. A curtain of leaves descending from two enormous beech trees reveals two canals that bisect each other to create the four heavenly rivers of paradise. The symbolism of Mughal garden design can be said to have a palpable effect on the visitor. The canals are punctuated by small jets of

water, which supply the soothing sound so essential to the paradisiacal experience. While Persian in its layout, this walled garden features Greek sculpture and architectural elements with the result that it is often referred to as the Greek Garden. The sight line down the central axis terminates at a set of double columns of Cipollino marble. Perched atop the columns are sphinxes carved by the Art Deco sculptor Paul Manship. Behind the columns an amphitheatre forms the north wall of the garden. At the terminus of the western axis, Corinthian columns ring a raised base adorned with a mosaic of Medusa's head. The Temple of the Sky, as it is called, overlooks a large swimming pool. In Untermyer's time, the pool was fed by water flowing from carved lions' heads and the bottom was decorated with intricate mosaics of sea life. These mosaics, along with those decorating the amphitheatre and lower portico, are thought to constitute the largest outdoor use of mosaic in America. Sadly, they have suffered significant deterioration.

Bosworth left the entire western side of the walled garden open to views of the Hudson River. Below a white stone balustrade, the Lower Garden is sited on a second terrace. This garden was used by Untermyer and his wife, Minnie, to host large gatherings and performances. The couple were strong supporters of the arts and regularly socialised with famous artists and performers of the time, while Isadora Duncan was among the elite performers at their cultural evenings.



The concept of the Walled Garden is Indo-Persian.



*Above:* The Temple of the Sky, showing the mosaic floor, with the Palisades in the background.

From the portico of the Lower Greek Garden, a deceptively modest ironwork gate opens to the Vista: a stunning view down to the Hudson River. The steps of the Vista, inspired by the Villa d'Este, were originally flanked by towering *Cryptomeria japonica*, which drew the eye down a verdant tunnel to the landing below. The evergreen allée is gone, but the semi-circular terrace with limestone balustrade remains, as do two monolithic Cipollino columns which frame the view. The contrast between the classical stonework and the raw beauty of the soaring cliffs on the opposite riverbank is breathtaking. Ironically, this view is unchanged from Untermyer's time, thanks in part to the philanthropy of his neighbour and rival, John D. Rockefeller. The Rockefeller family helped preserve much of the Hudson River's western banks as part of the Palisades Interstate Park.

At one time, on the north side of the Vista, there were extensive speciality gardens. Bosworth laid out a 'chain' of six single-colour flower gardens: pink, blue, red, white, yellow and, at the bottom, a delphinium garden. There were elaborate, terraced vegetable gardens in the Italian style, with long, tiled rills providing irrigation. There was also a formal rose garden (the 12 columns of its pergola remain) and a dahlia garden. Some of these gardens are recoverable, others were lost when parts of the estate were sold off.

Ever the showman, Untermyer enjoyed touring his grounds with guests, taking drives on the network of carriage roads. Among his favourite stops on the tour was his floral sundial, by which he would make a point of setting his watch. The dial was composed of colourful annuals, while the gnomon was evergreen.

Another aspect of the garden of which Untermyer was rightfully proud was the monumental water feature called the Temple of Love. A neoclassical gazebo with a filigree cast-iron dome sits atop what was designed to look like a natural rock formation. When functional, water cascaded down its sides, through grottos and finally into a rock pool.

Winding rock steps and two bridges lead up to the 'temple' from which the view is panoramic.

Samuel Untermyer's 150-acre (61ha) estate encompassed numerous gardens, pools, classical architecture, follies, statuary, and rare and exotic plantings that required a staff of 60 to maintain. During his lifetime Untermyer opened the gardens at Greystone to the public one day each week – and on one of these open days there were 30,000 visitors. His ardent wish was for his beautiful gardens to be enjoyed by everyone, and, accordingly, his will directed that the estate should become a public park.

However, he made no supporting endowment, so government agencies at both state and county levels declined to accept responsibility, citing a lack of adequate funding. Untermyer's large piece of waterfront property represented a significant loss of tax revenue and the expense of operating and maintaining the grounds is considerable. After his death in 1940, the legal status of the property was uncertain and the gardens endured decades of hard times. While the garden's fate was in limbo, financial difficulties and lack of leadership resulted in significant losses to the estate. Numerous important pieces of art and statuary were auctioned off and the mansion was razed.

*“During his lifetime Untermyer opened the gardens to the public one day each week.”*

Ultimately, Untermyer's garden was awarded to the City of Yonkers, but only after a portion of the grounds was sold to defray costs. The Yonkers Parks Department has worked to preserve as much of the gardens as its financial resources allow. In 1974 the Untermyer Park and Gardens was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Even so, over the years vicissitudes in public funding have translated to periods of neglect, and vandals and graffiti artists have had their way with many of the garden's fine features.

In 2010, the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy was formed and entered into a public-private partnership with the City of Yonkers. The Conservancy is an all-volunteer organisation created to bring additional resources to the preservation effort. Stephen Byrns, the Conservancy's founder, is an architect and former New York City Landmarks Commissioner. According to Byrns, “the interweaving themes of the garden and the lives of its owners” are being revealed as restoration progresses. Byrns and the Conservancy's trustees have raised monies for specific restoration and planting projects, have increased media visibility for the gardens and provided funding for two horticultural staff positions to augment existing Parks Department personnel. The Conservancy has been especially fortunate to have input from Marco Polo Stufano, founding Director of Horticulture at Wave Hill, a New York City public garden just down river.

Reviving the gardens is a Herculean task, and one that is on-going. Untermyer's original estate is now reduced to 43 acres (17.4ha), which is nevertheless a significant area to tackle. Of the plantings from his time, only the towering weeping beech trees and a handful of other mature trees remain. Restoration work has been inspired by the symbolism of Bosworth's design and by Samuel Untermyer, the man.

Because the property is listed on the National Register, projects with long-term implications are coordinated with the New York State Historic Preservation Office. Thus far the Conservancy has focused its restoration work primarily on the Persian walled garden. Head Gardener Timothy Tilghman points out that it is the only garden for which there are detailed written and photographic records, from which the team has determined that the year 1924 best represents the creators' landscaping vision. However, without Untermyer's considerable resources, it is impossible to carry out some of the labour-intensive bedding schemes that were changed seasonally in his day. In addition, Tilghman points out that the Conservancy hopes to introduce visitors to a diversity of plants that the original planting plans would not offer. “Plant selection and placement is guided by the past,” he says, “but augmented

*Below:* The Ampitheatre lies at the terminus of the central canal.



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Above: The Temple of Love.

with a degree of latitude that allows the gardens to continue [their] evolution in a manner we think Samuel Untermyer would appreciate.”

Untermyer's own words best express Tilghman's approach: “There is always something more to do, something that can be better. Indeed, one great advantage of the creating of gardens over other kinds of creative work is that you are never finished. When you do a painting or piece of sculpture it is done; you may enjoy it all your life, but work on it again you cannot. A garden on the other hand, is a little world perennially in the process of creation.”

Bringing the gardens back to their original glory is certainly a goal, but in the meantime there are graffiti to remove, overgrown gardens to unearth, new plantings to put in and existing ones to maintain. Clearly undaunted by a challenge, the Conservancy team would like to restore the Temple of Love next, waterfalls and all.

By leaving us his gardens, Samuel Untermyer ensured that his legacy would not be confined to dusty archives. Today, his abiding love of plants and gardening and his passion to share their beauty with others allows us to be transported to another time, to contemplate the symbolism of a classic design or simply enjoy a moment of serenity. The art and beauty of a great garden endures and continues to affect every visitor who steps inside the walls of Untermyer Gardens. 🌸



Samuel Untermyer (1858-1940) was a remarkable man. Unhindered by his relatively humble origins, he studied law at Columbia University and was trying cases in the court of appeals by the age of 21. He rapidly achieved a reputation as the best mergers attorney in New York at the turn-of-the-century and was the first to collect a one million dollar fee for a case. Famous for the trademark orchid in his lapel, he was referred to in the press as the ‘superman of law’. He maintained an active practice until his death.

Untermyer's personal and professional values made him reform-minded. He campaigned for what he believed was fair, be it affordable transport fares or women's suffrage. He was unconcerned about making enemies, taking on big business, finance and even his fellow lawyers.

A leader in the Jewish community, Untermyer was active in Zionist causes. He was one of the early voices against Hitler's regime and in the 1930s his Non-Sectarian Anti Nazi League worked to counter Nazi propaganda and undertook a controversial campaign for a worldwide boycott of Germany. In spite of his political activism, he never ran for office, though he did say he would have enjoyed the job of New York City Parks' Commissioner because “The parks of New York...ought to be planted out like the parks of European cities.”

Untermyer and his wife, Minnie, were a driving force in New York arts and culture in the early 20th century, hosting elaborate music and dance performances as well as political events at Greystone. They counted Albert Einstein, Gustav Mahler and the film-maker, Ernst Lubitsch, among their friends.

Untermyer's need for excellence and public recognition found him competing with titans like J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. An avid horticulturalist, he prided himself on the rare orchids he bred in Greystone's greenhouses and had a high degree of involvement with the landscaping of his estate.

True to his populist philosophy, Untermyer felt that his garden should be appreciated by the general public as well as the elite. He would be pleased that this dream is being realised.

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