

Moon walk: Great trails at Barrytown's Unification Theological Seminary

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If you've ever driven through the Red Hook hamlet of Barrytown, there's a chance that you've come across a mysterious, sprawling estate surrounding a brick edifice bearing the name "Saint Joseph's Normal Institute" in stone above its massive doors. And if you're not in the know, you might have wondered what these seemingly desolate grounds were. There are typically cars in the parking lots but not always people, despite the brick building's hundreds of windows, behind which, you begin to suspect, maybe someone is watching you.

Yet nothing but the call and response of birds can be heard at this sleepy institution. A quick look around reveals conflicting signs: Weathered marble saint statues rest near a Zen Labyrinth. "What is this place?" you ask yourself, and as you survey the various footpaths and dirt roads snaking into the woods, "Am I allowed to be here?" The answers are, respectively: the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) and yes, you are.



Lookout point on South Tivoli Bay on Father's Trail. (photo by Kate Korda)

Though marked by a sign at the entrance, the vast property has no visitor center and no kiosks with maps – unlike the neighboring riverfront estates, Poets' Walk and Montgomery Place. In its current iteration, the property serves as a campus for UTS, a religious higher education institution founded by Sun Myung Moon. The school is now interfaith, but many of its graduates are members of the Unification Church. According to hospitality manager Kate Korda, the Barrytown location is primarily used for brief intensive courses (hence the unusually quiet campus).

But what of the sign above the door, and the saint statues? The property was purchased by the Unification Church in 1974 and has an extensive past. Prior to the purchase, the property was owned by the Christian Brothers, and before that by notable families including the Livingstons. So, unsurprisingly, there's a lot to explore.

While the buildings are not open to the public, UTS formally opened its grounds in 2006, making Father's Trail a Greenway Heritage trail, in collaboration with the Town of Red Hook and the Winnakee Land Trust. UTS is home to three named trails: Father's Trail, Mother's Trail and the Theodore Roosevelt Trail. The longest of the three, Father's Trail runs along the Hudson, coming to a serene lookout point in South Tivoli Bay. The solitude is so remarkable that you can hear every small sound, from a train in the distance to a bird flapping its wings against the water. "I think people come here for peace and privacy," Korda speculates.

The path is dotted with benches ideal for solitary reflection and unobtrusive signs recounting the history of the trail in the era of Reverend Moon, for whom it is named. Henry Christopher, UTS's director of Admissions and Financial Aid and a former student of Moon, remembers the trail in those days, when Moon would take groups of students down to the bay to roast potatoes and catch carp. He suspects that the wide trail was used for carriages, and that it perhaps connected to Montgomery Place in the days when the adjacent properties were both owned by Livingston descendants.

Mother's Trail was dreamed up by a seminarian named Susan who, along with her classmates, carved out the trail between 1979 and 1980. The trail hugs the Carp Pond and veers off into a patch of woods that, Christopher claims, "you could get lost in." In addition to the internal trail entrance, the trail can also be accessed from East Field on River Road, a spot prominently marked by a water tower.

While the Carp Pond is a peaceful place, it has seen a lot of activity. It was expanded after the Unification Church bought the property in the 1970s. "The first or second class [at UTS] had to work in the mud," Christopher says. "They tried to do it by hand." After that failed, they got a crane, but "The crane broke down, and there are still pieces of it to be found back there." Aside from pond expansion, Moon's early classes were also put to work catching carp from South Tivoli Bay (known by students as "the Lagoon") and transporting them to the pond. Christopher recalls this firsthand: He once sustained a gash inflicted by a runaway carp that tried to escape mid-transit.

Last of the official trails is the Theodore Roosevelt Trail, which is actually comprised of overlapping trails on the northeast end of the wooded property, bordered to one side by East Field. "They weren't really intended to be trails," says Christopher, who added that they were cut by the Seminary's longtime groundskeeper in 1975 so that he could access the field with a tractor. Christopher himself gave the trails their name, and while they may not be the exact paths that nine-year-old Teddy Roosevelt roamed in his 1868 visit, Christopher says, "You can see the Catskills and such gorgeous sunsets up there. You can feel like you're living 100 years ago."

If not for its natural charm, UTS is worth the visit just for the history. Structures of various ages abound on the property, from barns to the remnants of old outbuildings to private homes rented out by the Seminary. There's the UTS history, recounted in part on the Father's Trail signs. There's the Christian Brothers history, which accounts for the imposing late-1920s brick building that was used as a boarding school, the marble statues and a large stone altar. The space that is now home to the Unification Church's Zen Labyrinth used to serve as a burial ground for deceased brothers. They were properly exhumed by the Christian Brothers before the property changed hands, says Korda.

There are these histories – and then there's the tale of Massena House. The original mansion was built in 1796 for John R. Livingston. It was a massive chateau-style wooden structure that he named for one of Napoleon's generals. In 1885, 25 years after the estate had been purchased by the Aspinwall family, the mansion burned down. The widow Jane Aspinwall purportedly told architect William A. Potter to "Build me a house that won't burn down." And she got her wish...sort of. The new Massena House was built out of brick and stone in the High Victorian Gothic style, and was much smaller than her former residence due to the cost of materials. "She hated it," Korda reports. "She was stuck with it for the rest of her life," says Christopher with a laugh. The second Massena House still stands today.

What goes and what stays on the old property seems to be a matter largely decided by practicality and the forces of nature. It lacks the pretensions of careful manicuring and remodeling, allowing relics of its history to stand side-by-side with its repurposed spaces. While the extensive carp-fishing may be a thing of the past (it's now legally regulated), there's no shortage of things to do on the UTS grounds. "There's so much out here to see, and the trails give you access," says Christopher. History geeks, architecture fiends, joggers, kayakers, tree-peepers, birdwatchers, dog-walkers and even ice-yachters can all enjoy the property. And of course, if you're feeling spiritual, there are plenty of places to meditate. It is, after all, a seminary.

The Greenway trails of the Unification Theological Seminary are located at 30 Seminary Drive in Barrytown. Directions: Drive north from Rhinebeck and take Route 9G past the turnoff for the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge. Continue 1.8 miles on 9G and turn left onto CR82. The campus entrance is on the right after about .9 mile. For an online map, visit www.dutchessny.gov/countygov/departments/dpw-parks/tmsuts.pdf. For more info, call (845) 752-3000.