

## Holy Land, U.S.A.

by Mark Dee '11

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*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*

*Ephesians, 4.1*

We know he was a full-time lawyer and a part-time prophet, a some-time builder and an occasional artist. We know that was under five feet tall (but just barely, at 4'11"), and that he possessed the religious zeal of a crusader (but instead of marching on Jerusalem, he brought it home). We know that he was born in 1896, died 90 years later, and some time between that John Baptist Greco brought the Holy Land to the weathered stones of Waterbury's Pine Hill.

His Holy Land was built of some 200 biblical models, sculptures and scenes erected above a mill town in central Connecticut. When asked why he made it, John had his answers, stock responses that would start like sermons:

"I built the place because I've devoted my life to doing something for the cause. I never married, and some day we all have to give an accounting of our lives. A married man does plenty for others. But I have no one and I have to show something."

*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...*

*Revelation 21:2*

Waterbury goes by the "Brass City," which explains its motto -- *Quid Aere Perennius* - that reads more like its tagline -- *What lasts longer than brass?* It's not unlike other Connecticut cities, which also derived their nicknames from their products: Meriden was the Silver City, New London the Whaling City, Danbury the Hat City, though it prefers not to speak of it. In fact none of them do: Meriden now has no silver, New London no whales, Danbury precious few hats, and Waterbury, no more brass than is left in old pipes and trumpets. (The New Brass City is Moradabad, India, 167 miles from New Dehli, much farther from Waterbury)

What it lacks in brass it almost makes up for in landmarks. The Union Station Clock Tower, each face declaring a different hour, is mentioned in passing by Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Fifty-two years after the play's release, then-Mayor Philip Giordano would meet beneath the tower (in more than passing) with the underage daughter and niece of a prostitute he frequented. He's in federal prison, and will be for the next thirty years.

A quarter mile east, obscured from the tower's sight by St. Mary's Cathedral, there is the forty-foot Easter Island Statue (Moai). It stares eye-level into oncoming traffic heading westbound on I-84. The Moai was constructed but not explained for the dedication of the "Timexpo" museum. The museum, which is dedicated the Waterbury Clock Company (now Timex, hence the clever portmanteau), is mute on the statue's importance. The statue, for its part, offers no answers. Lips taut, almost smiling, it just stares out onto the highway. And beyond that, up the dynamited cliff that once was the windswept slope of Pine Hill, the Moai stares up at a 56 foot fluorescent cross, and Holy Land, U.S.A.

*When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.*

*Genesis 18:33*

We know he was a shoemaker's son, and was on track to be a priest until he got sick. He never explained the illness, or how it pulled him away from the cloth. But he could preach without ordainment, while still practicing law in his hometown of Waterbury. He did both for some sixty-one years, on street corners, in his soft voice with a light Italian accent that hinted at his heritage.

Holy Land took root in his mind in 1943 while setting up a manger scene on the town green. In the years that followed the concept grew; nurtured by faith and ambition, it multiplied from one scene to hundreds. And he didn't look far from home to find a place to build it:

"I picked this place because the terrain is very much in our favor. It lends itself easily to the original. Everything in the Bible took place on the heights. The laws of Moses came on the heights, Christ preached his sermon on the mount and he died on a mountain. All these things took place on a hill like we have here."

*He shall build a house for My Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*

*2 Samuel 7:13*

In the fifties Waterbury was still the Brass City. Its mills peaked with wartime demand in the forties, and they carried up its workers with them. The war years brought newfound importance to a city that always wanted to see itself as special. Military production made it a potential target, and even though it was for German bombers the citizens of Waterbury walked through their black out drills not with quivering countenance but tight-lipped smiles, imagining their city from above, as the bombers might see it, the glinting brass that must have looked like gold.

But brass rusts so much faster, and the post-war years hit hard. Orders slowed, and to compensate the mills reneged on the wartime contracts made with workers. By 1953, when Greco set upon his project, people were on their way out. He bought 18 acres on Pine Hill - worthless land above the city's largest factory - from two fellow attorneys. One year later he started work on Bethlehem, helped by a group of occasional apostles who called themselves the "Companions of Christ."

The valley's mostly immigrant population was mostly Catholic, and sympathetic in heart (but not wallet) to John Greco's mission. So they gave what they could and he took it, fashioning cities out of scrap metal and treadless tires. He built the Garden of Eden with two mannequins and a wax apple. He recreated the Catacombs, two hundred feet long, from stacked cinderblocks and a canvas roof. He told the story of Cain and Abel, of Job and of Noah (I imagine those were his favorites), of Satan and Santa in dioramas and crude sculptures - 200 in all spread across the 18 acres. He built a Hollywood-style sign out of plywood. He carried his cross to the top of the hill, raised it and looked with longing eyes at its silhouette against the sky and the Union Station Clock Tower and the mill that someday would become the Moai.

By 1956 Bethlehem was finished and Jerusalem underway and Holy Land, U.S.A. began welcoming any visitor who could navigate the tangled, unmarked roads that traversed up Pine Hill. They came by the thousands to see it. Busloads of pilgrims flocked to Waterbury - at its peak it averaged 44,000 people a year - 500 cars and another 300 buses on any given weekend.

*Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy O LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day.*

*1 Kings 8:28*

"Here we show how Christians were tortured for their faith," he would say to the tour groups, pointing to the park's entrance: mannequins (from Worth's "Smiling Service" Department Store), assailed by tigers (from a nearby gift shop) burning on spits above a fake fire (unplugged logs from an electric fireplace, covered in orange cellophane flames). He had a crown of thorns woven, for authenticity, in the Garden of Gethsemane - this much we know - and though he probably never wore it I imagine him holding it here, staring through it, running his fingers over the spines. Then he would smile with the corners of his lips for the cameras, and continue on up the hill towards Bethlehem.

"Through Holy Land we show people the life of Christ and open The Bible to them. We don't try to convert anybody, we just show them what we believe. I did it for the Lord, like a prayer."

*It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again.*

*Isaiah 34 9-10*

Only the Dead Sea was left to build when the plagues came, twenty-one years after Bethlehem appeared on the hill. They may have started when the state blasted I-84 through the heart of the valley, bisecting Waterbury and cutting the north slope of Pine Hill into bare granite face. The Catacombs were the first to go, teetering atop the newly formed cliff, two-hundred feet worth of cinderblocks above an interstate highway. The bulldozer, when it came, didn't care about what Greco had painted inside - the story of the Christ, and the names of every pope on the stacked cement walls. It didn't care about the "Save the Catacombs" prayer group, which Greco started in desperate faith or doomed optimism. And it didn't care about John himself, because it didn't know that of course the man, now 82, would rebuild it somehow, somewhere else. The bulldozer only cared for the highway, for the city it fed and that city's people, to whom John Baptist Greco was fading into the landscape of the barren hill he dreamed upon.

Or they may have started when Eden burned, melting plastic Adam and that wicked tree he sat beneath. It spread from the Garden to the Gates of Damascus, and from there to the towers that guarded Jerusalem. Before it died out it had claimed the Laws of God (as displayed in an open plaster book) and the statue of Satan (fenced in to protect it from a persistent vandal with a standing vendetta). Even Santa went up in the flames. The firemen did as much damage: "They came in and knocked everything down," recalled Greco, "but I'm rebuilding it." After that, the park was closed for reconstruction.

But the city had changed and the plagues continued, treating Greco like Job without giving him any reasons. Vandals followed the fire and mostly finished what it started. They broke the roof of the Nativity Cave. And the walls of the Catacombs, which Greco had begun to rebuild in a replacement trailer the state offered in apologetic afterthought. Greco was confined to his room after dark, only resting when a patrol car, monstrous and anachronistic, would mark the passing hours for that lazy clocktower, too confused to toll a bell. And maybe he would sleep and dream that just dream, of the glowing cross climbing slowly up from the granite, and him with it like the steel he set, reaching upward towards the blue-white cumulus sky. Or maybe he would lie awake, eyes cutting darkness, staring at that closed, formless ceiling or beyond it at that open, formless sky, filling its gaps with clouds and angels. Maybe he would call them down, down here to Pine Hill, to ask their bleeding feet if these stones are sharp as thorns, to ask their distant eyes if they remember how either felt at all.

*If I wait, the grave is mine house: I have made my bed in the darkness.*

*Job 17:13*

During his last two years, when Holy Land was closed to the public, he lived alone on Pine Hill. He might have walked the paths he built over thirty years. He might have fiddled with charred sculptures, overtaken by weeds and vandals. He might have wondered *what lasts longer than brass?*: not the mills that made it, they gave way to a mall; not Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, they are only made of coffee cans and plaster; not the Garden of Eden, it was bulldozed and paved under I-84; and not the man who built it all, he finally had to leave.

John Baptist Greco lived on Holy Land until the day before his death. On Saturday, March 11, 1986, he was transported to Monsignor Bojnowski Manor, a nursing home 15 miles up I-84. The next day he died, 90 years old. Following Greco's death Holy Land, U.S.A. passed to the Religious Sisters of Filippi, in whose passive stewardship it remains.

*The just that walketh in his simplicity, shall leave behind him blessed children.*

*Proverbs 20:7*

Drive down I-84 today and you'll see a different cross. It's only six feet shorter but it's simpler, steel bars without the neon glow. It's lit some nights by a flood-light at its base, but it's not something John Greco would build. The "Holy Land U.S.A." sign is different too, redone by some intrepid Boy Scouts after community services badges in the years after Greco's death. Its letters are simpler too, whitewashed and unlit.

If you head up the hill, if you duck the chain and jump the weeds, you can crawl through the vestiges of one man's vision. Bethlehem is one of the few pieces that remain more or less intact now, a manger across from an inn with "No Vacancy" painted on the door. Vandals let it be, less out of revelry than reason: the city is built into a steep rock slope, and there are other, easier things to destroy.

But if you go to the base of the sign, and if you turn down your eyes, you might see a plaque that appears more or less untouched. It's small, unassuming, and for that you may miss it. But in plain lettering painted on red brick it reads two words: "Honor God."

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