

Holy Land USA, a Religious Vision in Ruins

Joey Skee (May 02, 2008)



During the 1960s and 1970s, 40,000 people visited Waterbury, CT annually to pray at Holy Land USA, a Catholic theme park created by John Greco. Now it lies in ruins.

Writer and teacher Joanna Clapps Herman emailed me yesterday with an update on one of the great Italian-American folk environments, Holy Land USA in Waterbury, Connecticut. On Tuesday, a demolition crew dismantled the 56-foot stainless steel and fiberglass illuminated cross that stood on the city's Pine Hill overlooking I-84 because it had become unsound due to weather and vandals. ([watch video](#) [2].)

It was lawyer John Greco who conceptualized and implemented the construction of Holy Land USA in the late 1950s on his 17 acre property. Greco, a devout Catholic, envisioned his sprawling creation



as a devotional act. A sign posted for many years there read:

“A group of dedicated men present a pictorial story of the life of Christ from the cradle to the Cross—it is our prayerful wish that the project will provide a pleasant way to increase your knowledge of God’s Own Book and bring you closer to Him.”

The completed site was an amalgam of Italian sacred and American secular models, ranging from the presepio (Nativity scene) and the [sacro monte](#) [3]’s religious dioramas to Disneyland and other theme parks.

According to Waterbury historian Sando Bologna, “Greco was born in Waterbury on March 29, 1895, the son of Vincenzo and Raffaella Greco. The parents brought him to their birthplace, Torrella dei Lombardi, Avellino, when he was small boy. When he was 13 years old, the family returned to Waterbury.” (The Italians of Waterbury, 1994). John entered the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. in order to become a priest but was forced to drop out due to illness and lack of finances. He went on to earn a law degree from Yale University and passed the bar exam in 1926. [Barry Dillinger’s web site](#) [4] states, “In the mid-1930s he founded the Catholic Campaigners for Christ [of Connecticut] as a lay group to preach the Bible at a grass roots level.”

In 1956, Greco organized a cadre of volunteer laborers —the self proclaimed “Companions of Christ”—who created a miniature Bethlehem, the 200-foot-long “Catacombs” lined with religious scenes of Christ’s martyrdom, and an assortment of structures from chicken wire, iron rods, plywood, brick, and cement. In addition, Greco obtained statuary and other objects discarded from the Vatican Pavilion and the Jordon Building at the 1964-65 Worlds Fair held in New York. In 1968, the group erected the illuminated cross on Pine Hill, which became a beacon for motorists traveling in the Constitution State.



During the 1960s and 1970s, Holy Land USA was a major tourist/pilgrimage site, with an estimated 40,000 people visiting annually in tour buses and automobiles. Greco was made a Knight of St. Gregory by Pope Pius XII, as well as an honorary citizen of Bethlehem.

By the 1980s, visitors waned and the site became a nocturnal hangout for local youth who vandalized it over the years. The Holy Land USA spiraled into disrepair and the site was officially closed in 1984. When Greco died on March 8, 1986, at age 90, he left his property to the Religious Sisters of Filippi.

In the past couple of years, I've been making my way to famed folk art environments like Rodia's Watts Towers and Wisconsin's Dickeyville Grotto. Holy Land USA is renowned among folk art cognoscenti. So I was thrilled when Joanna offered to take me to her hometown Waterbury to walk among the ruins in early winter 2005. The site's decrepitude transformed it from a theme park of religious sentiment to a Lilliputian Coney Island of American urban decay and blight. The South Bronx as if staged by Disney. I retrieved a piece of rotten plywood to incorporate in [my domestic presepio](#) [5] that Christmas, a silent tribute to a fallen Italian-American vernacular landscape.



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