

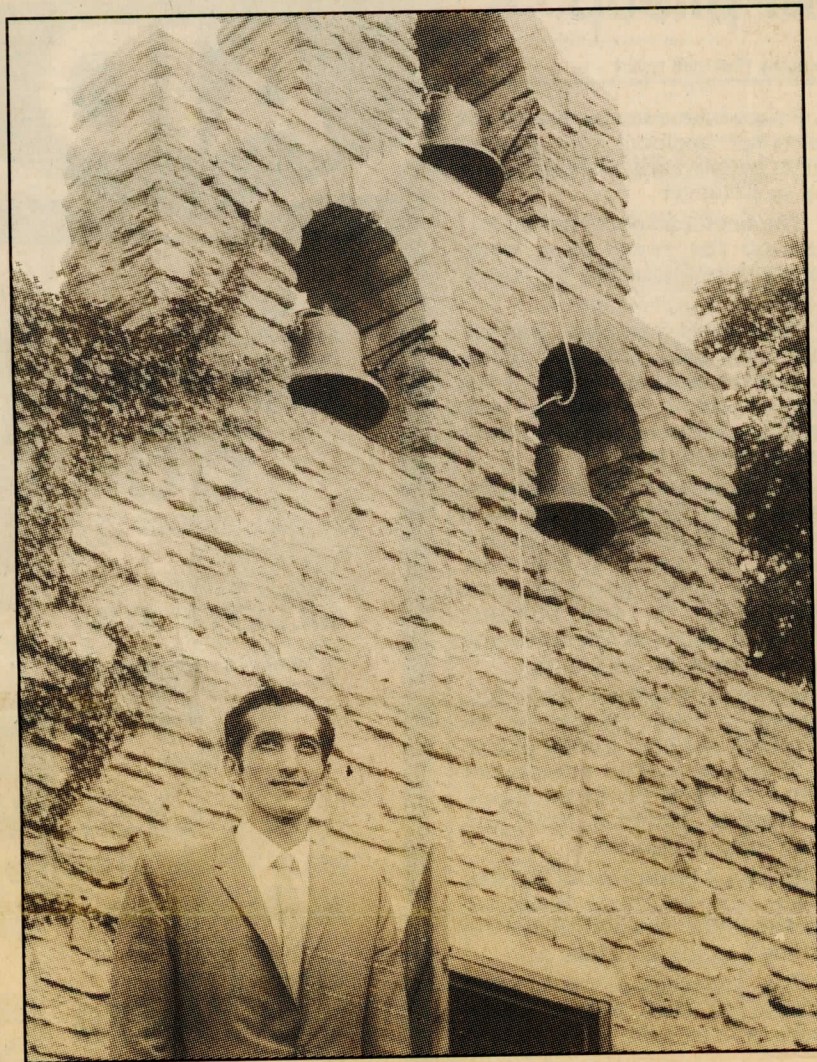
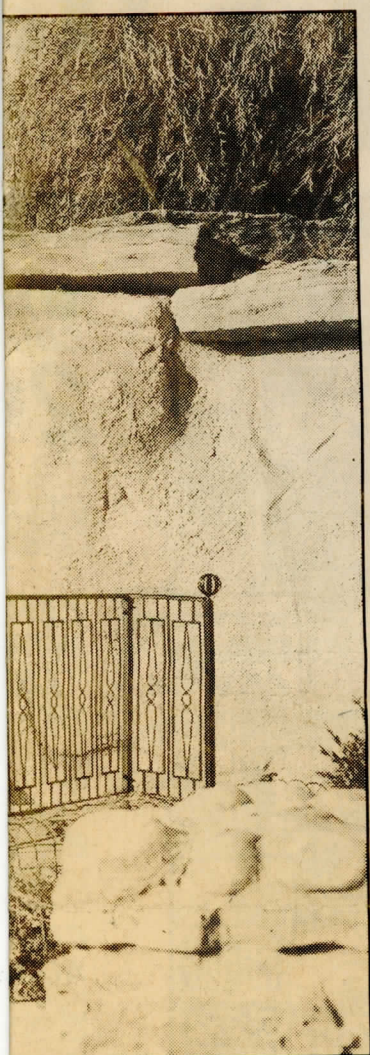
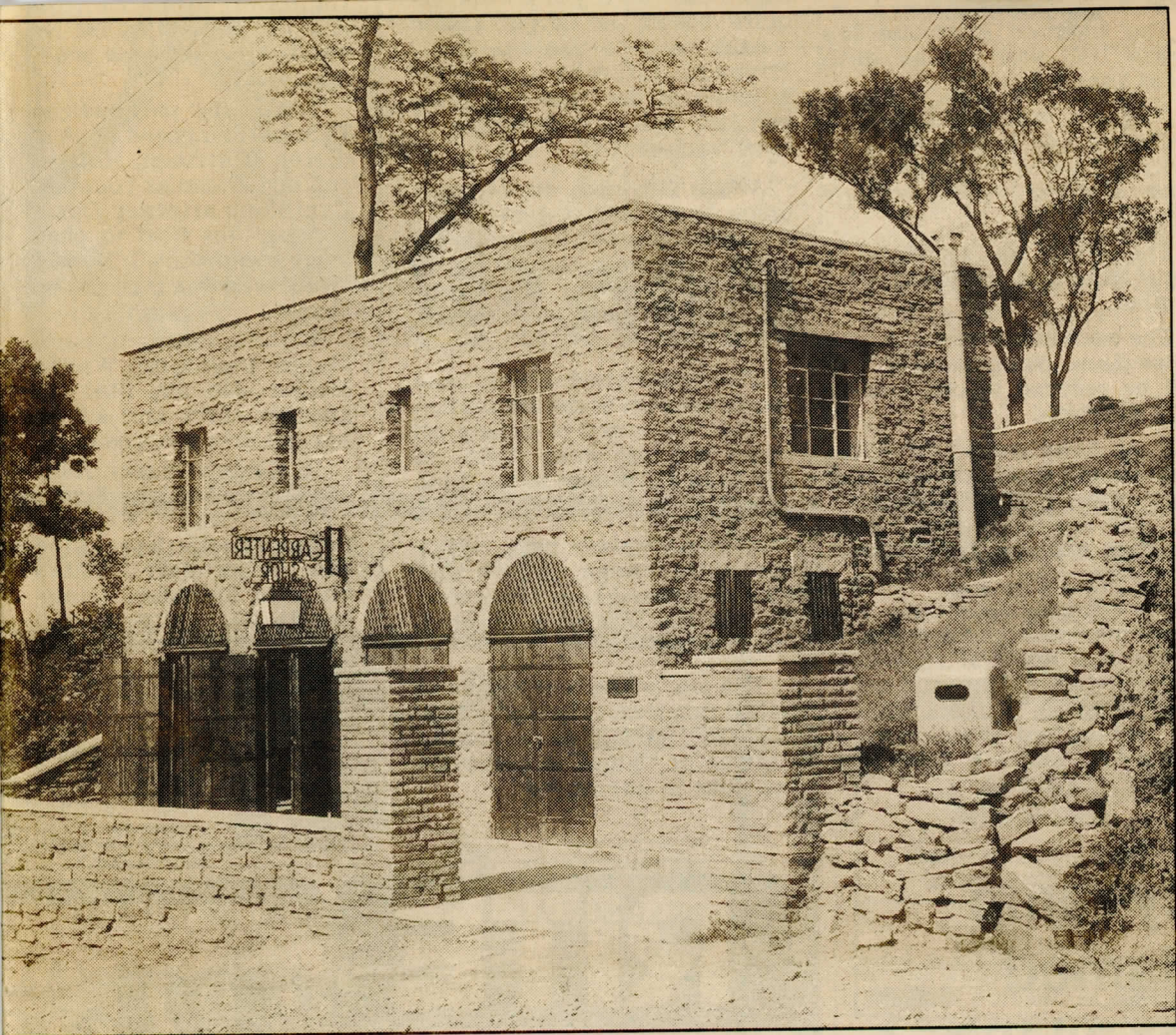
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# The Garden of Hope: elusive dream

## Covington pastor dared to recreate the Jerusalem tomb of Jesus Christ

An early picture of the Carpenter's Shop, at right, the current entrance to the Garden of Hope off Edgecliff Road in Covington. Below, the actual replica of the tomb. At bottom right, Samuel Mattar, who lived above the carpenter's shop for a while, in front of the chapel in the early 1970s.





It was Rev. Morris H. Coers' dream, but others embraced it as a tourist attraction. Things haven't quite worked out like everyone hoped.

Rev. Coers dreamed of recreating the Jerusalem tomb where some believe Jesus Christ was buried. He envisioned a pastoral scene on a Covington hilltop. It became the Garden of Hope.

Rev. Coers was born in Shelbyville, Ind., and received his training as a Baptist minister at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He later served as a minister at churches in Shelbyville, Bluffton, Ind., and Jackson, Mich.

He also became involved in politics, serving as an Indiana state representative in 1931 and 1933 and becoming a friend of former Kentucky Gov. A. B. "Happy" Chandler.

During World War II, Rev. Coers joined the Red Cross as a field director and traveled extensively in Europe and Africa. He later said a Holy Land trip in 1938 was when he began forming the concept for the garden.

In 1945, Rev. Coers came to Covington as pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church at 20th and Greenup streets.

He believed in getting his message to as many people as possible. He had radio shows first on WKRC in Cincinnati and then on WNOP in Newport. His broadcasts also became a forum for public service appeals.

In 1951, Rev. Coers sought donations to send the Terry triplets from Pine Knot to a medical specialist in Boston. The Terrys — Harry, Barry and Larry — were born blind. He also raised money for their education.

And when blood was needed for Bobby Ashcraft, a 13-year-old Covington boy who was undergoing an operation to seal a one-inch hole in his heart, Rev. Coers helped lead the drive.

The first report of his plans to build a replica of Christ's tomb was published in the Kentucky Times-Star on March 31, 1956, the day before Easter.

He told the reporter, "Pilgrims to Jerusalem are awed by a thousand places of sacred spots. One of the most inspiring is the empty tomb believed by many to have been the tomb of Christ. It is found in a beautiful garden, and it is cut into the side of a hill."

He said a similar garden could attract thousands from around the world who "will never have the privilege of walking in the Holy Land."

He envisioned building the tomb with stones from the Holy Land and decorating it with flowers from Jerusalem.

He said every large community in the country had at least one major tourist attraction, and the Garden of Hope would be such a place in Greater Cincinnati. He promised more details at a sunrise Easter service at the Dixie Drive-in Theater.

The name "Garden of Hope," and its "Chapel of Dreams," was suggested to Rev. Coers by a young poet he had met and encouraged to publish.

The woman was Alice Kennelly Roberts, now a columnist for The Kentucky Post.

The site selected for the Garden of Hope was a 2.5-acre site on Edgecliff Drive in Covington. By November 1956 work was under way.

A Times-Star story on Nov. 4 said the site offered a panorama of Covington, Newport, Bellevue and Cincinnati. To get there one drove

up 16th Street.

The writer said seven tons of steel and 300 tons of concrete and stone already had been trucked up the hill. The tomb was taking shape. Plans called for a structure 45 feet long, 22 feet deep and 12 feet high. A Palestinian wall was planned behind the tomb, and in the front, the "Chapel of Dreams" — patterned after a 16th century Spanish Cathedral.

Wire mesh covered the outside of the tomb. It was sprayed with concrete, treated with acid and tinted to make it look like natural rock from Jerusalem.

The donations were coming in, but not at quite the pace organizers hoped. Still, Rev. Coers was optimistic the Garden of Hope would be ready for dedication by Easter 1957.

The year came and went, as did the spring and summer of 1958, and the project still was not complete.

The project, however, was not without some big name backers. Among them was Hulbert Taft Jr., great-nephew of President William Howard Taft.

While Taft was president, the mayor

of Tokyo had given Japanese cherry trees to the city of Washington around the capital. The event, Hulbert Taft said, was to give Japanese cherry trees a Rev. Coers in the Garden of Hope

A Kentucky Post article in 1958, said more than 100 trees were on the grounds, as well as a replica of Christ's tomb, a chapel. The main attraction was a stained glass window in the Christ Church in Cincinnati. The window was made of sticks from a Cincinnati and three railroad.

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The carpenter doors, each weighing 100 pounds, were crafted by Elmer Wendling of the Roy Coates painter-carpenter shop.

The writer added that Rev. Coers had made the trek to the site for the dedication work in mid-June.

A Kentucky Post article on Sept. 20 said Rev. Coers already had gone to the site for an additional \$12,000 needed to complete the project.

Among the project's backers was a drawing board with the name of Rev. Coers.

Rev. Coers said the project was a "happy day for visitors" on Sunday as many people walked through the garden.

Among those who had helped with the project was Sam Taylor, a resident of Bethel, and Solomon Mattar, who had helped with the garden tomb in Cincinnati.

The younger Taft was in charge of the task of doing the work of the Garden of Hope. He was expected to attend the dedication and attend the

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**Rev. Morris Coers was a man with a heart  
for people in need. On a 1938 trip to the  
Holy Land, the idea of creating a model of  
Christ's tomb was born in his mind be-  
cause he knew many people could not  
experience Jerusalem as he had.**

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ironwork for Garden  
also to live at the site  
as More College.

Rev. Coers, who was in his early 50s,  
was in relatively good health and read-  
ing at his home at 2223 Eastern Ave.  
on Feb 24, 1960, when he apparently  
suffered a heart attack and died.

A Kentucky Post account the next  
day said Rev. Coers had been planning  
to officially dedicate the Garden of  
Hope on Easter, April 17. It also was  
his intention to add some attractions,  
including three crosses on adjacent  
land he hoped to buy. The site near the  
Garden of Hope was the same place  
the KKK had burned crosses.

By February 1960, an estimated  
150,000 had toured the garden.

Among those personally affected by  
Rev. Coers' life was Kenton County

Circuit Judge Melvin Stubbs. He said  
the minister always was ready to help  
anyone in need, day or night.

"He touched the minds and hearts  
of a great many people," Stubbs said.  
"He kept himself broke giving money  
to charity."

Survivors included his wife, Ver-  
nice; a son, Michael, still at home; and  
his mother, Bertha Coers of Anderson,  
Ind.

Because of the weather, the newspa-  
per said Rev. Coers would probably be  
buried at Highland Cemetery. There  
were plans to move the body to a per-  
manent site near the Chapel of Dreams  
at Garden of Hope.

**W**ith Rev. Coers' death, the Garden  
of Hope reverted to a committee  
from the church. Plans included a  
torchlight pilgrimage the night before  
Easter to the Garden of Hope, where a  
sunrise service was planned.

During the next few years, vandals  
hit the garden — damage was estimat-  
ed at one point at \$5,000 to \$7,000. The  
stained glass window was broken.

The vandalism and a \$54,000 debt  
raised the issue of whether the garden  
could remain open.

In March 1967 a couple of solutions

were discussed. One called for the  
state to take over the garden as a tour-  
ist spot. Another called for formation  
of a non-profit corporation to operate  
the garden. Backers included Coving-  
ton Mayor Bernard Eichholz and Cov-  
ington businessman Joseph Koo.

There apparently was interest from  
the state, but church members decided  
to keep ownership of the garden.

In summer 1967, a non-profit orga-  
nization was chartered. Among its offi-  
cers were Koo, state Rep. Philip King,  
Kentucky Post business manager John  
Feldmann and Rev. Clel Rogers, pastor  
of Immanuel Baptist. The group also  
arranged for Covington police officer  
James Summers to live in the apart-  
ment above the carpenter's shop for  
added security.

**T**he agreement called for the non-  
profit group to lease the Garden of  
Hope from the church for \$1 a year.  
The group sent out 2,000 letters re-  
questing donations.

The campaign failed. In March 1970,  
another corporation was formed. Sam-  
uel Mattar, who had played a role in  
construction of the garden, led it with  
Robert Ehret and Truet DeMoisey.

Mattar's father, an Arab Christian  
who had helped provide drawings and  
materials for the original construction,  
had planned in 1967 to help in the  
restoration of the garden.

He and his wife were packed for the  
trip when the Six-Day War broke out  
between Israel and its Arab neighbors.  
During the war, on June 6, Dr. Solo-  
mon Mattar was shot and killed.

The effort by Samuel Mattar and  
his partners ended like the previous  
attempts, and in February 1971  
operations of the Garden of Hope re-  
verted to Immanuel Baptist Church.

Rev. Coers' body was moved from  
the garden to a new site at Highland  
Cemetery. His widow, who died last  
year, had the body moved there be-  
cause of vandalism.

Immanuel Baptist Church contin-  
ues to operate Garden of Hope — oc-  
casionally drawing groups from out of  
town, when weather permits. The  
dream remains — tattered, but alive.

**The study of Northern Kentucky  
history is an avocation of staff writer  
Jim Reis, who covers the suburban  
cities for The Kentucky Post.**