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Forbidden Tunnels Guard CU History

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The comprehensive tunnel system that runs beneath the Columbia University campus is the stuff of legend; it weaves through the history of Columbia as thoroughly as it does through the physical campus, from the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum that once stood on this spot to the Manhattan Project to the 1968 student takeovers.

Because the tunnels under campus receive little attention in any of the scholarly histories of Columbia, the only effective entrance to them, both literal and figurative, is through the cult that has grown up around the University's labyrinthine underworld. For decades, an underground community has thrived around a collective fascination with the tunnels, keeping the vast and intricate lore of Columbia's subterranean regions alive from one generation of students to another.

As with any decent cult, the Columbia tunneling community has its order of high priests: the students and alumni who have probably dedicated more time to the tunnels than to all of their combined schoolwork. Their names appear scrawled throughout the tunnels; the most prolific is a man whose *nomme de guerre* is Benoit, after the professional wrestler. Benoit, SEAS '01, began exploring the tunnel system in February of 2000, and possesses a voluminous knowledge of the system, which he shares via an anonymous e-mail address, undercolumbia@yahoo.com, that he has scribbled on myriad surfaces in the tunnels.

continued their passion beyond graduation.

Ham, CC '02, began tunneling "about the second week of freshman year," and over the past five years has left such obscure signs of his presence in the tunnels as a cache of trampolines discarded by a downtown health club.

Perhaps the only luminary of the tunneling community to gain notoriety not only among security guards but also on an international scale is Ken Hechtman. On a yellow steel door leading into the tunnels proper beneath Engineering Terrace is a crude drawing in permanent marker of a rat's head, with the acronym ADHOC underneath. ADHOC stands for the Allied Destructive Hackers of Columbia, the short-lived group of undergraduate renegades that is Hechtman's legacy.

Hechtman entered Columbia College in 1986 and was expelled less than a year later for stealing uranium-238 from a lab in Pupin Hall. He enjoyed brief celebrity in early 2002 after he was held captive for a week by the Taliban while covering the war in Afghanistan as a freelance reporter.

According to Benoit, the oldest part of the tunnel system is a passage connecting Buell Hall with St. Paul's Chapel. It predates Columbia's Morningside Heights campus to when the land was occupied by the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum. Other tunnels date from the early decades of the University's tenure in the neighborhood. An I-beam in the tunnels below Uris is stamped "July 1885."

The tunnels below Engineering Terrace and Uris Hall are the deepest on campus, running fifty feet below the surface. Although long since abandoned, in earlier times they were used to transport the coal that heated the University. In some places, rusting furnaces and coal car tracks remain.

Sections of the 1885 tunnels are accessible by descending through the Fairchild Center to the University's power plant. The plant is a large complex of brightly colored pipes that "looks like Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory," Ham said.

You can go deeper still, through a rusted grate in the floor. These tunnels are a series of brick corridors that occasionally connect to ventilation shafts. Depending on the weather, the stone floor can give way to mud and even small bodies of water that must be crossed on rotting two-by-fours.

The crown jewel in the tunnel system, however, is the decommissioned first floor of Pupin, which can only be reached through the tunnels. The floor was once home to the Manhattan Project and other wartime research in the 1940s, and still contains a fascinating array of physics esoterica.

Undoubtedly the most impressive relic in Pupin is the cyclotron. Columbia's cyclotron was the first machine to split the atom; after it fell out of use, parts of it were sent to the Smithsonian Institute, but most of the device remains on Pupin's first floor, in Room 127.

"If you're into physics," says Benoit, "it's a sight to behold."

However, due to lingering concerns over radiation, it may be a sight not everyone wants to behold.

Prior to 1954, when the city granted Columbia permission to close off 116th Street and create what is now College Walk, the tunnels served as pedestrian thoroughfares for a campus divided by a well-trafficked street.

The tunnels also played a major role in the student strike of 1968, when student activists used them to communicate between buildings they had occupied and administrators ultimately used them to gain entrance to barricaded buildings.

At the time, Phil Schapp, CC '73, was a student working at WKCR 89.9 FM, the Columbia radio station where he still serves as jazz historian. He recalls how members of the station's news department, led by Andy Seiter, CC '71, used the



The tunnels and appropriated phone lines meant that "while Mike Wallace and the CBS network were doing 'man on the street' interviews, [WKCR] was in any building we wanted, live, on high quality wiring, when none of the networks had any access whatsoever. It allowed 'KCR to completely dominate the live coverage of the event," Schapp said.

Although it is generally assumed that the lower campus tunnels were closed off for good after the 1968 strike, Benoit has used them since, and claims that others do as well. The tunnels beneath College Walk can be accessed by any individual resourceful enough to obtain the right keys.

There is a chance that the Columbia College Student Council-led tour of the tunnels on Monday, March 31, will rob them of much of the mystique they hold for students. A large part of the fun for the tunneling community is, of course, that the object of their devotion is forbidden.

However, legends of tunnels like the famed passage between Butler and Low Libraries, which since 1968 has not been accessed by even the most intrepid student, will most likely persist. These are, after all, the stuff that dreams--and disciplinary actions--are made of.

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