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# WEIRD FLORIDA



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LONGSTREET  
Atlanta, Georgia

## Other Books by Eliot Kleinberg

*Pioneers in Paradise: West Palm Beach, The First 100 Years*  
(with Jan Tuckwood); Marietta, Ga., Longstreet Press, 1994

*Florida Fun Facts*, Sarasota, Pineapple Press, 1995

*Historical Traveler's Guide to Florida*, Sarasota, Fla., Pineapple Press, 1997

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This book is dedicated to the brothers of Pi Lambda Phi Fraternity at the University of Florida, especially Ron "Manl" Mans and Steven "Fish" Aronow. This group taught me to be a man and make friends for life but also displayed weirdness as an art form. They personify Weird Florida.

*Eliot Kleinberg*  
*Casa Floridiana*  
*Boca Raton*  
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## **THE KORESHAN**

Stand on the promenade. Feel the shells crunch underfoot on the path. Tune out the traffic on U.S. 41, just a few yards away, and listen carefully for the sounds of the marching band, its music bouncing off the trees that line the Estero River in Estero, about 15 miles south of Fort Myers.

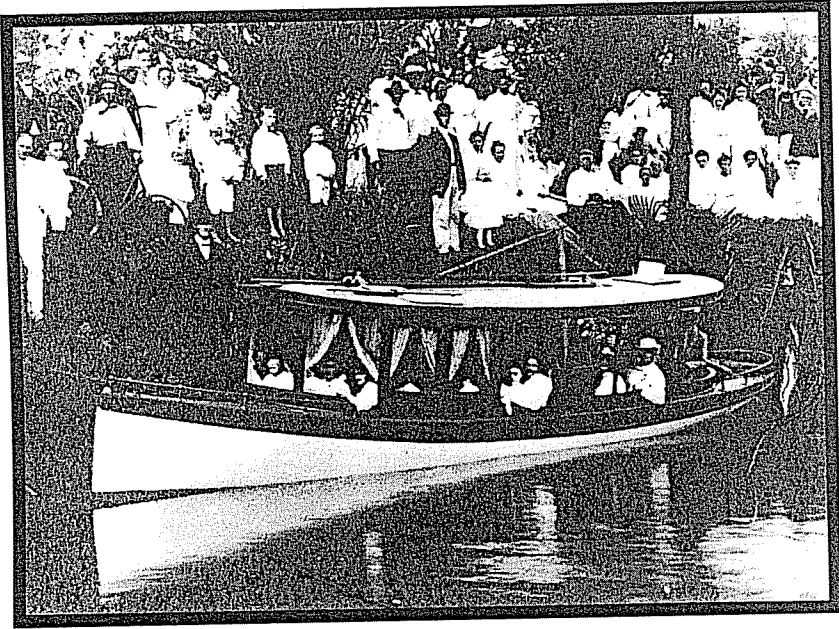
See the wood-and-concrete Founder's Home, restored to its turn-of-the-century splendor — when it was, for millions, the nucleus of a New Jerusalem that would be carved out of the swamps of Southwest Florida.

Look to the porch for the charismatic leader — a pied piper who based a religion on his belief that we live not on top of the Earth, but inside it, and who established a church on the foundations of communal living and pureness of body and mind.

The vision died soon after the man, even though the faithful waited in vain in the hot sun for his corpse to rise and lead them to a new world order.

Now the old buildings, the meandering river, and the tall trees of the Koreshan (pronounced kuh-RESH-in) State Historic Site are all that remain of this New Jerusalem.

Each fall, the Koreshan Solar Festival, believed to be one of Florida's oldest continuously observed celebrations, celebrates Dr. Cyrus Reed Teed, founder of the Koreshan.



Koreshan State Historic Site

Members of the Koreshan community

"People said he was crazy, but look how many followed him; he had to be very dynamic," says Brad Burris, a ranger at the 100-acre site, part of 305 acres given by Teed's followers to the state in 1961. Ironically, the donation by the followers, who imagined a city for millions, has kept the site from joining the sprawl that has changed Southwest Florida.

"If it weren't for that [the donation], you'd have condominiums on the Estero River; you better believe it," says Sue Roper, public relations director for Koreshan Unity Inc., the only remaining fragment of the Koreshans.

The corporation occupies a round building with glass walls and a view of a thick forest across U.S. 41 from the historic site.

Inside, hundreds of tattered books from the original Koreshan community line shelves along with Koreshan brochures, photographs, and other materials.

The corporation continues to operate, pressing for intel-

ligent use of natural resources — a popular idea now but in many ways as bizarre a concept a century ago as the other ones put forth by the Koreshans.

The group's mission is not to spread the religion but to be its historian, President Jo Bigelow says. She stresses that, despite its offbeat vision of the universe, the group espouses some modern tenets.

"They had no prejudices," Bigelow said. "They were ahead of their time."

On the wall hangs a giant piece of concrete that reads, "Cyrus Shepherd, Stone of Israel." It's all that remains of the tomb of Cyrus Teed.

### **THE SEVENTH MESSENGER**

Cyrus Teed came a century before another Koresh — David — would draw the world's attention to Waco, Texas. There, an April 19, 1993, FBI assault on the Branch Davidian cult compound led to a fire and the death of 86 cult members.

Born in 1839 to a Baptist family in upstate New York, Teed became a brain surgeon and came to question accepted concepts of the universe's structure.

In 1870, as he meditated in his lab, he was visited by an angel in a gown of purple and gold with "long, golden tresses of profusely luxuriant growth over her shoulders."

The angel, Teed said, gave him a "divine revelation": The universe did not surround but instead was completely enclosed by the Earth — a hollow "macroscopic egg" about 8,000 miles in diameter. The Earth's surface lies along the inside lining, and the moon, planets, and stars all revolve around the sun, an electromagnetic battery at the center of it all.

Twenty-eight years later, at Naples Beach, Teed would spread a giant wood-and-brass device along the water's edge, point it toward the horizon, and perform an experiment he claimed proved that the Earth's surface was concave. He would brazenly offer \$10,000 to anyone who could refute his conclusions; there would be no takers.



Koreshan Unity, Inc.

Cyrus Reed Teed founded the Koreshan

Shortly after his visit from the angel, Teed founded the Koreshanity in Chicago.

He preached that when the sexes blended into one eternal and noble entity, world perfection would be attained. He said the flesh is immortal through reincarnation.

He disdained profanity, tobacco, and liquor and said his Utopia would allow "no bawdy houses, no tobacco shops, no distilleries, no breweries, no gambling houses nor other forms or dens of vice."

He embraced ecology, racial and sexual tolerance, celibacy, communal living, and communal ownership of all property.

He proclaimed himself the prophet "Koresh," Hebrew for Cyrus and for shepherd, and the "seventh messenger — the prophet who would usher in the millennium." He predicted Koreshanity would become one of the world's great religions.

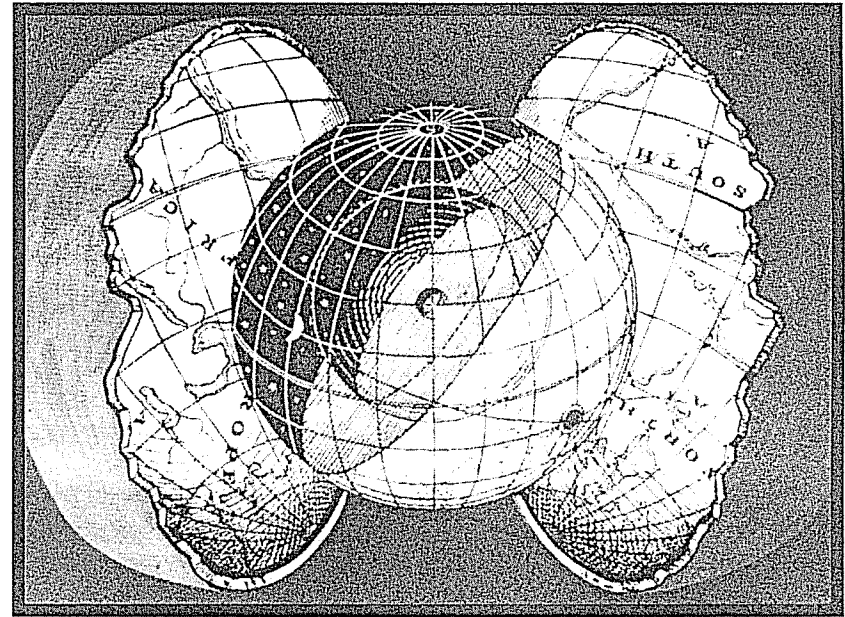
**REFUGE**

Teed's founding group met opposition in upstate New York and other settlements across the nation. He was constantly threatened, and groups reportedly gathered to plot his lynching. Teed eventually met a Fort Myers businessman who suggested he and his group might find refuge and peace of mind in Southwest Florida.

Teed came to the area, where a German-born farmer and widower became so enthralled he promptly joined up and donated his land along the banks of the Estero.

"People coming to us in Estero come to a pioneer life, one of strenuousness and sacrifice," Teed wrote. Some 200 of his 4,000 devotees came. Battling the heat and mosquitoes, they planned and began building what he said would grow into a sprawling metropolis.

"It will contain 10 million people, white and black, and will become the greatest city in the world," Teed wrote.



Koreshan Unity, Inc.

The Koreshans believed we live inside the Earth

Forests were cleared and lush gardens planted. Maps were drawn showing 600-foot-wide roads emanating from a hub at Teed's headquarters. Waste would travel on a conveyer to a location 50 miles away. "There will be no dumping of the public waste into the rivers, bays, and gulfs."

Buildings and halls were planned. A marching band, an orchestra, pageants, and plays were organized.

"Koreshanity defends faith of the Jew in the Old Testament and of the Christian in both Old and New Testaments," reads a hand-painted sign, one of several original Koreshan objects gathering dust on the stage of the Art Hall — one of eight buildings still standing out of the original 60.

In the hall, you can find the original instruments of the orchestra. And on a giant table stands a model showing a globe split in half like an eggshell to show the continents lining its inner surface and, at its center, the sun, with stars swirling around it.

On one wall, an oil painting portrays the New Jerusalem. On it appears the Latin phrase *vincit qui se vincet* — he conquers who conquers himself.

Teed's followers established the area's first school and numerous businesses — including a 200-loaf-a-day bakery, a general store, a boatyard, a machine shop, and agricultural processing centers. They built a publishing house, where they produced their newspaper, *The American Eagle*. It is still published today by Koreshan Unity.

### **WAITING FOR TEED**

At its peak, about 250 people populated "New Jerusalem," which had spread across 7,500 acres of Lee County and other sites across America. It was welcomed by many southwestern Floridians. But some people in nearby Fort Myers did not care for its residents' liberal views on racial and sexual equality and feared their voting power.

One day, as Teed waited to pick up a Koreshanity member at the Fort Myers train station, a local resident began

berating him and roughing him up. A sheriff's deputy came upon the scuffle, struck Teed in the head, and carted him off to jail for disturbing the peace. Charges were later dropped, and two years later, on December 22, 1908, Teed died at the age of 69. Followers said they believed the beating had hastened his death.

Because of their trust in reincarnation, Teed's followers laid his body on a plank on Estero Island and waited patiently for him to return to life. After four days, the remains showed no signs of movement. Finally, the health inspector insisted Teed be interred. Devastated devotees laid Teed in a four-by-eight-foot, five-foot-tall tomb.

Twelve years later, a hurricane swept the tomb away. All that was left was Teed's tombstone, an act that stirred the faith of the Koreshans.

But politics and infighting took their toll on the group. A Tennessee factory, whose mortgage had been guaranteed by the Koreshans, failed, causing financial stress on the group. Finally, a large section split off, and many of those who remained succumbed to old age. By 1940, the Koreshans had dwindled in number to 36 and had an average age of 79.

New life was breathed into the Koreshans with the arrival in 1940 of Hedwig Michael. The Jewish-born immigrant who fled Nazi persecution turned her life over to Koreshanity and its teachings, becoming the group's leader and only acknowledged member after the last three original Koreshans died in the 1960s.

Michael is responsible for the deeding of the site "as a gift to the people." She died at the age of 90 in August 1982 and is buried next to the bakery.

"Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity," reads her grave marker. Around it, the grounds of the park have been restored to look as they did during Koreshanity's "golden years" — 1904 to 1907.

"When I first moved here, I thought they were a bunch of kooks," Koreshan's Sue Roper says of the group. "I could-

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n't understand how people like that could have followed them. But I changed my mind."

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The Koreshan State Historic Site is south of Fort Myers. Take Interstate 75 to Exit 19, to Corkscrew Road, west two miles to U.S. 41. Admission charged. Write to Box 7, Estero, FL 33928. Call (941) 992-0311.

The Koreshan Unity Foundation, Inc., Box 97, Estero, FL 33928. Call (941) 992-2184.

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