Gary Hauk calls it “the grotto.” The vice president and deputy to the president has been a member of the Emory community for years, but even among longtime Emory staffers he’s in the minority for knowing this place. An informal, completely unscientific survey suggests that most people on campus have no idea it’s there.

Step through the gap and you descend toward Nettie’s Creek, which burbles out of one stone culvert and into another, disappearing under the Center for Library and Information Resources (CLAIR), the Woodruff addition built in 1996-98. Sunlight filters through the canopy and reflects off the windows of Jazzman’s Café on the first floor. But even a distracted student in search of diversion at the café would be hard pressed to make out the walkway from his seat.

University architect Jen Fabrick knows the grotto. She arrived at Emory in early 1998 as the library addition was being completed, and remembers the ravine then as recently graded and planted. “I never did find out who laid out the path, but I’ve enjoyed its offered moments of peace at various times over the years. I’d be interested to know.”

Before 1996 there was a pedestrian bridge on this spot, spanning the creek from one corner of the quadrangle to the library plaza entrance. Charles Forrest, Woodruff facilities director and project manager for CLAIR, says the path was “intended to be an amenity for the community, to provide access to the remnant ravine on the upstream side of the addition.” Though the new construction bisected the ravine, Nettie’s Creek flowed on, as water will, from this upstream portion—now Asbury Ravine—beneath the library and into Baker Woodlands, passing under Mizell Bridge behind the Carlos Museum (see “Place Apart,” Spring 2006).

The walkway and plantings were an effort, says Hauk, to alleviate “some consternation” about the construction “intruding into the greenery of that part of the ravine.” Forrest confirms this recollection. To minimize the environmental impact on the green space spanned by the pedestrian bridge, he says, “the project team committed resources to restore the area with native plantings appropriate for a piedmont ravine.” To do this, landscape architects conducted a pre-construction inventory of species in the ravine, matched this to a list of plants associated with piedmont forests, then planted accordingly. Today more than sixty species thrive here, including roughly fifteen canopy or understory trees and dozens of flower, shrub, and herbaceous varieties.

Let your eyes adjust, and look around. Familiar leaves of oak, maple, laurel and holly mix with a profusion of others with less common names: doll’s eyes, trumpet flower, spangle grass, snowdrop tree. Others are more fanciful still. Arrive armed with a plant guide and you might find dog hobble, cranebill, wood vamp, creeping lilyturf, and the barely credible “heartleaf foamflower.”

The path has no official name. Librarian Tim Bryson calls it “the trail” and provides helpful information on its planning and design, as well as on subsequent plant inventories and tours. Christopher Beck knows it too, though he wasn’t yet at Emory in 1998. A senior lecturer in biology, Beck was chair of the Committee on the Environment from 2006-09 and considers the ravine plan an upgrade. “My understanding is that the area the path cuts through was covered in English ivy at one point, and volunteers from the library removed it and native plants were restored to the area.” Those ivy pulls continue periodically.

Keep walking past more greenery and stacked stone, and with a few last steps you emerge on a cobbled terrace, a few feet from the statue of Robert Woodruff near the library’s entrance. Be prepared to startle anyone sitting on the benches there. Odds are they don’t know the path exists; you might as well have walked out of a wall.

If landscaping, stonework, and a drop in noise and temperature aren’t appealing enough, you’re also likely to be escorted on your visit by chipmunks rustling in the foliage and mockingbirds overhead. There’s plenty to see here, without looking all that hard.