

# **A HISTORY of THE MORRIS ARBORETUM**

Mrs. E. Florens Rivinus, Mrs. Frederick W. Morris



**"Compton"**

Country Residence of Mr. John T. Morris and Miss Lydia T. Morris

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The Morris Arboretum is located in the northwestern section of Chestnut Hill and is partly in Philadelphia County and partly in Montgomery County. It consists of approximately 175 acres of rolling terrain and a considerable range of habitats. The Morris' called the Philadelphia and residential area "Compton" and the Montgomery County and farm area, "Bloomfield". The property borders on the Wissahickon Creek, along which there is a charming woodland trail, a fairyland of wild flowers in the spring.

Mr. John Morris (1847-1915) and his sister, Miss Lydia Morris (1849-1932), in 1887 built and dwelt in a handsome Victorian house overlooking the Whitemarsh Valley on the Compton estate. The drawing room was octagonal in shape and all the interior fittings and the articles of furniture were constructed of white mahogany. Other rooms were finished in different kinds of wood. The rest of the house was furnished expensively with equally great taste. Their residence has since been demolished.

The grounds on this property were developed in the best Downing style, (A. J. Downing's book, *Landscape Architecture* was the gardener's bible in those days) and included the Swan Pond on which there was a little Greek temple. A grotto and numerous fountains are scattered over the property.

Two streams run through the Compton area. One, near Hillcrest Avenue, feeds the lake, and the other, Papermill Run, on the north side meanders into the Wissahickon Creek. In the Morris' time, a fine herd of purebred Jersey cows grazed in the meadow along this stream. On the Bloomfield property, another stream also runs into the Wissahickon. In addition to the regular farm buildings, there is a pre-Revolutionary mill which Mr. Morris restored for pumping water to the area.

In 1887 John and Lydia took a trip to the Orient. The flora of that world was a revelation to them. Accordingly, on their return, they brought with them two Japanese families and installed them in houses on the Compton estate. One Japanese was a landscape architect and the other was a gardener. The landscape architect lived in a house of similar architecture to the main house, on the corner of Hillcrest and Germantown Avenues, which has since been demolished. The gardener and his family lived in the house on Hillcrest Avenue next to the public gate and Arbor Shop. With their assistance, Mr. Morris imported hundreds of seeds and plants which were planted according to his Oriental employees' directions. Many of these introductions are still flourishing.

Besides his interest in horticulture, Mr. Morris was something of a scientific engineer and in 1900 he designed the Fernery with automatic control of environ-

mental conditions — a miniature “Climatron” years before the one in St. Louis. Mr. Morris died in 1915 and Miss Lydia continued embellishing the property, adding the Rose Garden in 1925.

Concerned that their horticultural legacy be preserved, the Morrisises provided an endowment for the maintenance of the property “as an arboretum for the public.” When Lydia Morris died in 1932 this endowment was established as the Morris Foundation and placed under the direction of an Advisory Board of Managers. As specified in her will, it was named “The Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania” and supervisory responsibility was assigned to the Botany Department and the Trustees of the University. However, the Arboretum does not receive direct financial support from the University. A Managing Director, reporting to the Provost and the Advisory Board, is the administrative officer in charge.

The Arboretum cooperates with other arboreta and botanic gardens throughout the world exchanging seeds and plants. Its plant records are now being incorporated into a national computerized record center. All plants on the grounds are labeled with botanical and common names.

Before the Bowman’s Hill Wildflower Preserve had their own facilities, the Morris Arboretum did their propagating for them. Of special interest was the box huckleberry, *Gaylussacia brachycera*, found growing wild in Perry County in central Pennsylvania and claimed to be the oldest plant in the world.

In 1974 a grant was awarded to the Arboretum by the National Park Service for research in the propagation and testing of trees suitable for urban parks.

The Thayer property adjacent to the Compton estate, containing a dwelling, stables and several acres was purchased in 1948. The dwelling was used for the Administration Building and converted to offices, laboratories, classrooms, the herbarium and the library. It is known officially as Thomas Sovereign Gates Hall. During Dr. John Fogg’s directorship (1954-1967) a drug plant garden was created. It is unique because of the many tropical plants that are grown out of doors in summer and overwintered in a special greenhouse. This garden is an asset for the many pharmacy and medical students and the pharmaceutical industry in the Philadelphia area. In 1957 it received the Founders Fund Award of the Garden Club of America.

The Associates of the Morris Arboretum are interested in the Arboretum. They provide volunteers for guiding, plant propagation, exhibits, plant sales, seed distribution, labeling, teaching and other activities. There were 1,100 members in 1975.

The staff of the Arboretum provides an information service for plant identification, the diagnosis and control of disease and insects and advice on cultural problems of plants. The library is available to Associates and students. Adult courses in horticulture, botany and related subjects are given during the year, along with lectures and other events for members and the public. Guided tours of the Arboretum are popular with school children and teachers. The summer gardening and crafts program, known



as "Grow It!", is most successful. Accredited courses in environmental education are now offered for teachers.

The Arboretum has published the following books:

*Weeds of Lawn and Garden*, J. M. Fogg

*A Selected Guide to the Literature of the Flowering Plants of Mexico*,

F. K. Langman

*The Origin and Cultivation of Shade and Ornamental Trees*, H. L. Li

*Woody Flora of Taiwan*, H. L. Li

*The Fern Guide*, Edgar S. Wherry

*The Atlas of the Flora of Pennsylvania* by Drs. Wherry, Fogg and Wahl and *A History of the Morris Arboretum* by Dr. Dirk Visser are now in preparation.

Constructed in 1972, the Hillcrest Pavilion provides a public gate house and the Arbor Shop where plants from the greenhouses are sold along with books, containers, garden supplies, stationery and gifts. A spring plant sale is held in early May and in December the Arboretum conducts its annual Holly and Greens Sale and Christmas decoration workshop.

Several memorials have been donated to the Arboretum; viz, the Samuel Baxter Memorial near the heather garden, the Wharton Sinkler Wisteria Walk, the Mallery Fountain in the Rose Garden, the Richard Chillas Hemerocallis Garden, and several memorial trees throughout the grounds. In June 1974 Miss Lydia's Rose Garden was dedicated to Marion W. Rivinus. The first Morris Arboretum Award was given to Dr. John M. Fogg in 1975, accompanied by the planting of a magnolia tree marked with a commemorative plaque. The award was made to Dr. Edgar T. Wherry in 1976.

In addition to its quiet beauty, the collection is a priceless cultural, educational and scientific resource. It is planted as a place where trees can be studied, preserved and appreciated.

The Morris Arboretum is open to the public and guided tours can be arranged.

#### Advisory Board of Managers, 1976

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