

Lydia Morris (1849–1932), Horticulturist

Lydia Morris was an educated, active, and forward-thinking woman whose passion for horticulture and vision for land stewardship and preservation lives on in the beautiful gardens and vibrant educational and research programs at Morris Arboretum in Chestnut Hill. Lydia Morris and her brother John were born to a prominent Philadelphia Quaker family. Their father, Isaac P. Morris, owned a foundry at 16th and Chestnut Streets and made his fortune in iron and steel manufacture.

Neither Morris nor her brother, two years her senior, ever married. When John retired and sold the family business in 1881, the pair travelled the world—from England, France, and Italy to Asia, Russia, and Norway—but their many adventures always brought them back home to Philadelphia. The urban sprawl of the Industrial Revolution had left its marks on their childhood home in Frankford and, eager to preserve a legacy for future generations, in 1887 they purchased 26 acres of farmland in Chestnut Hill overlooking the Wissahickon Valley. Here they built their estate, “Compton,” which comprised a mansion, carriage house, various outbuildings, and extensive and eclectic gardens. The brother and sister worked with a large gardening staff to tend and develop the property that, by 1913, encompassed more than 166 acres.

Lydia shared her extraordinary gifts in the gardens she nurtured, in her active role in civic affairs and encouraging education, and even in the kitchen, where she compiled a handwritten cookbook of her recipes over three decades beginning in 1883. On a trip abroad in 1889, a fellow passenger aboard the S. S. Lahn composed a poem celebrating her sparkling eyes and wit and her brother, “dignified and grave, yet gay ... With tenderness fraternal, loving, true.”

In the course of their extensive world travels the brother and sister amassed a wide-ranging collection of art and craft objects, as well as rare and unusual specimens of plants and trees. They added these treasures to their home and gardens, which they planned would someday be a public garden and educational institution. The philanthropic pair also gifted many pieces of art to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the University of Pennsylvania Museum.

After her brother’s death in 1915, Morris continued to oversee the cultivation of the gardens and, at her death in 1932, the property was left in trust to the University of Pennsylvania. Though it might be lost on those of us today who enjoy the freedoms and opportunities that women (and men) of previous generations gained for us, the wording of John Morris’s will reflects the strong influence of his sister. His wish was that the property would become “a place where young men and possibly women may be taught practical gardening and horticulture.”

The gates of the Morris Arboretum opened to visitors in 1933. While the mansion was dismantled in 1968, a rustic log cabin built in 1908 as Morris’s private retreat has been restored. Its porch waits for visitors to sit and enjoy, as she did, the stream and woodlands.

Sources

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