From the Archives

By

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A compilation of articles appearing in the *Morris Arboretum Volunteer Newsletter* in 2021

A Picture Worth 300 Words…A Street Plan for Compton

1876 City of Philadelphia Atlas, philageohistory.org

Imagine Morris Arboretum as a suburban neighborhood, its streets running at oblique angles without regard for the topography of the land, from Germantown Avenue to Meadowbrook, Northwestern to Hillcrest.

Picture a street named Dickinson commencing at Germantown Avenue and following the exact path of the Ravine Garden. Imagine Norwood Avenue skirting Wissahickon Creek and brushing against the Dawn Redwoods. Consider a short street called Lake Avenue – nowhere near a lake – aimed straight for the Log Cabin. Then there's Stroud Street running from Germantown through Swan Pond to Stenton. On the east side, Huston Street cuts through Oak Allée. And the longest street, Ravine Avenue, takes off at Pennock Garden, crosses Bells Mill and ends at the railroad depot.

I didn't make this up. Neither did John and Lydia Morris.

When the Morrises began assembling acreage in Chestnut Hill, they weren't developing a neighborhood. They were developing a private country estate and filling it with plants and shrubs, greenhouses, garden follies and fountains. But other plans were already in the works and Philadelphia City Atlases contain the evidence—six streets were superimposed as dotted lines

running across adjoining properties in a number of atlases. In fact, a grid of streets appeared overtop of properties (that would one day become the arboretum) in atlases as early as 1876 and as late as 1942. Over time, the routes were redrawn in curvilinear fashion but names never varied: four streets bore the names of previous owners of the land.

This was likely the plan of J. Lowber Welsh, the wealthy financier who bought up much of the land in northwestern Chestnut Hill with the intention of constructing "country seats." Evidently, the plan wasn't feasible and when Welsh sold the better portion to the Morrises, street plans came to a dead end.

A Picture Worth 300 Words…A Fine Chippendale Sofa

In 1909, when Robert Moon compiled the final two volumes of his 2000-page opus, *The Morris Family of Philadelphia*, he sub-titled them *Supplement*. Filled with family miscellany that didn't fit into previous volumes, the supplements include illustrations and details of "family relics" in the possession of the extended family. Moon obtained illustrations by contacting relatives who gave him access to their homes and agreed to have photographs taken of their furniture, silver, china, clocks, portraits, currency, William Penn's signature on a land patent—any item of significance and antiquity.

John and Lydia Morris had more than their fair share of family relics and arranged for a commercial photographer to come to Compton and photograph furnishings and landscape features. Moon published a dozen photographs taken at Compton, including this one, which he captioned:

An ancient "Martha Washington" sofa and a chair, both of which were formerly in the Cedar Grove Mansion. Now owned by Mr. John T. Morris and Miss Lydia T. Morris, "Compton," Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pa.

In 1926, when Lydia T. Morris gave the family's summer home, Cedar Grove, to the Pennsylvania Museum, she turned over most of the contents as well. The museum accessioned hundreds of household items, among them this same sofa and chair, described in the museum bulletin as:

Chippendale sofa with yellow brocaded upholstery…one Chippendale side chair, the legs are straight and underbraced.

In 2013, when the Philadelphia Museum of Art deaccessioned the sofa and authorized its sale, the auctioneer's catalog described it as:

A fine Chippendale mahogany serpentine-back sofa, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, circa 1770.

Stripped down to the wood frame for the auction, this sofa, which once graced the parlor of Cedar Grove, sold for $59,375, almost twice the estimated price. Learn more about the Morris family's provenance of this sofa here.

A Picture Worth 300 Words…The Palm House

Soon after moving into their mansion at Compton, John and Lydia Morris began planning for a "range" or cluster of greenhouses, some attached by passageways. To accomplish their ambitious plan, they turned to the leading horticultural building firm in the U.S., Hitchings & Company of New York. Their first project was the Palm House.

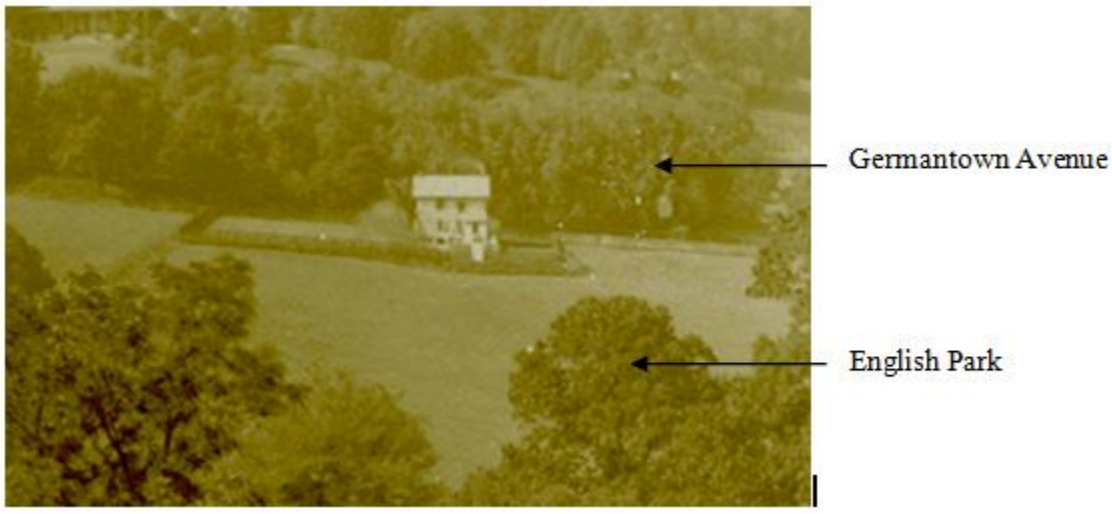
Given John's interest in all things architectural, and the lay of the land, it comes as no surprise that he asked Hitchings for a couple of options. Hitchings submitted three renderings: straight sided, curve sided, and curve sided with dome roof. John chose the second design, then he began to tweak it. He wanted a pool for aquatic plants in the center of the house, running the entire distance, with walkway and plant benches around the sides. And he wanted a wing for roses in

back, And how about a workroom on the side. And a narrow propagating hall connecting all three structures. Oh, and hipped gables. In a matter of months, the 52’ by 22’ house with its equal-size wing was under glass and filled with all sorts of hothouse plants, including the requisite palms.

Then as the first exotics bloomed in January, 1895, the Palm House went up in flames. John and Lydia weren’t there to see it—they were abroad with their travel companion, Louise Kellner, and learned about the blaze by telegram. Fortunately, the Palm House was insured and Hitchings rebuilt it. Later on, Hitchings listed this unique multipurpose greenhouse design in their company catalog as “No. 131.”

For close to fifty years, the Palm House was home to orchids and caladiums, waterlilies and trumpet vines. But by then, its cast iron frame had become too brittle to support the weight of plate glass and it had to be taken down.

A Picture Worth 300 Words…
The Farmhouse on Germantown Pike



What is it like to immigrate to the United States and land a job right away—plus move into a house on the property? That was John Threlfall’s good fortune in 1911, when he came to Philadelphia with his wife Phillis. Threlfall, the son of a gardener, was from Bradford, England. He was raised, not on a farm, but in a row house with nine siblings. Yet despite making a decent living in the “Woolen Capitol of the World,” he and Phillis, a weaver, decided they’d be better off in the U.S.

John arrived at Compton three months before Phillis, just long enough to learn the dairying routines with the Morrises small but productive herd of Jersey cattle and get the house ready for habitation. It was an old house and undoubtedly needed lots of elbow grease.

We don't know when the house was built, but it appears on the 1843 map of Philadelphia County, bearing the name Megonegal. More than likely, this was Daniel Magonigal, an immigrant from Ireland around 1808, who farmed the land along Germantown Road. Before Magonigal, the property was owned by George Edelman, a "Pennsylvania German Pioneer" and mason by trade. By the time Threlfall moved in, the house had been occupied by several other families, including Joseph Dickinson in the 1860s, whose wheelwright shop stood next to the house.

In 1910, this house and surrounding acreage at the corner of Germantown and Hillcrest Avenues was purchased by John and Lydia Morris for creation of English Park. And a year later, Threlfall moved in. Interestingly, the house did not have a cellar, so Compton employees dug one out and plowed ground for his vegetable garden as well. Eventually, the house became uninhabitable and was taken down, twenty years or so after the Arboretum was founded.

A Picture Worth 300 Words…May Day at the Arboretum

Photo from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 10, 1936, p30 at Newspapers.com

In days of old, when dogwoods bloomed every May, a coronation was held at the Arboretum, complete with music and dancing and pageantry. Festivities commenced with a procession of Penn undergraduates (female) from the mansion to the "natural amphitheater," where the public awaited. One of the participants in this parade was the senior who classmates had chosen as queen in a spirited competition. But unlike the coronation of a real sovereign, neither the students nor the audience knew which classmate would be named "Queen of the May" until a wreath of flowers was placed on her head.

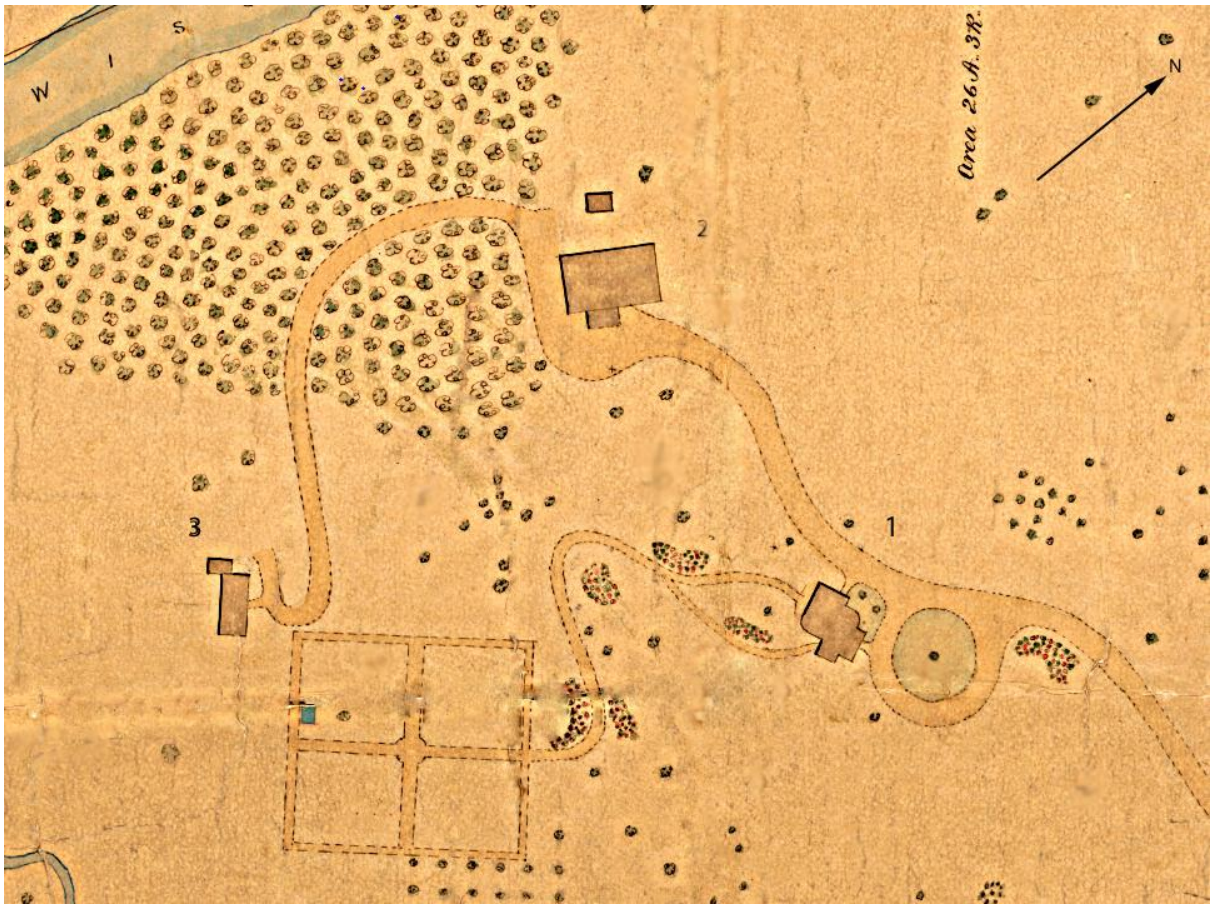
Entertainment was provided by undergraduate dancing troupes and the all-female dramatic society, performing plays like “Alice Through the Looking Glass,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “The Wizard of Oz.” Some years, the cast numbered 100, and when the university symphony orchestra accompanied musicals like “Peter & The Wolf” and “Tales of The Nutcracker,” the number doubled. Add the women’s glee club and truly the hills were alive with the sound of music!

During the 1920s, the women had celebrated May Day at Penn’s Botanic Gardens or Ury House, home of the Director of Women. But a decade later, they were running out of space for ever-larger May Day events. With the opening of the College of Liberal Arts for Women in 1933, enrollment swelled and only one of Penn’s outdoor venues could accommodate the annual rites of spring—the newly-established Arboretum. For the next fifteen years, weather permitting, May Day was celebrated in traditional English fashion at the Arboretum.

The exact location of these lavish May Day productions—the “natural amphitheater”—is unclear (Azalea Meadow is a likely spot). We do know that it was surrounded by dogwoods and reachable in heels.

A modern May Day at the Arboretum (Morris Arboretum Archives, 2013.2.16)

A Map Worth Studying…First Survey of Compton



Section of 1892 survey of Compton by H.A. Stallman, photoshopped. 2018.29.12

Though the geography may not be obvious at first, the 1892 survey of John and Lydia Morris's "country seat" tells us much. This section of Compton captures two notable landscape features: a large tract of woods and a four-quadrant garden with a small orchard wrapping one corner. The map also underscores the influence that the dramatic terrain has on placement of buildings and features.

When the engineer surveyed the estate, it consisted of three parcels of land, the first bought in 1887 and two more in 1892. All three properties were purchased from J. Lowber Welsh, a multi-millionaire railway organizer and neighbor.

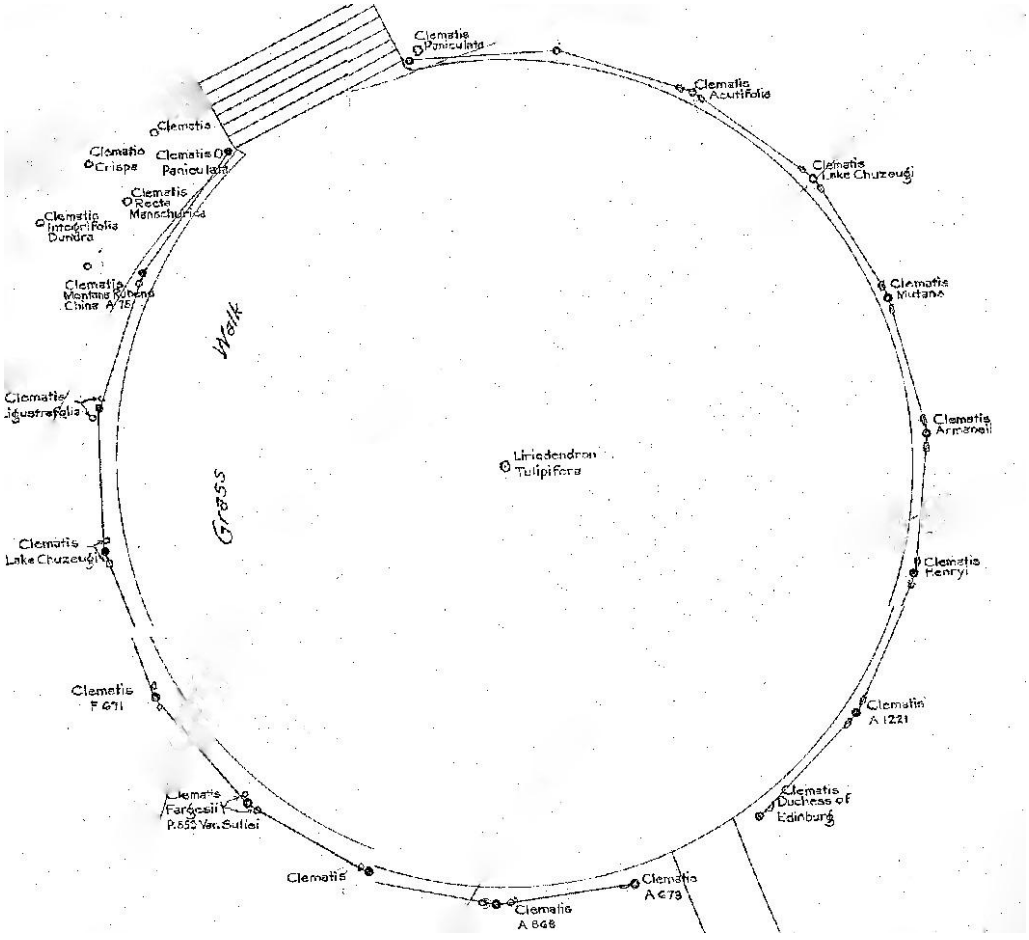
The Morris's first building project was the mansion (#1) with a connecting driveway to Meadowbrook Lane. John and Lydia moved into the mansion in July 1888 and immediately set to work constructing the first features: the Orange Balustrade and Boat House.

A stone carriage house with living quarters (#2, now Widener Visitor Center) was built toward the northwest the same time as the mansion. Behind the carriage house stands a blockhouse-style barn constructed of stone and wood that now houses restrooms.

The first greenhouse (#3) was built to the west, adjacent to the rose garden. Over time, the Palm & Rose House (1895), Fernery (1899) and Headhouse (1941) were added to the greenhouse "range."

Over a period of two decades, the Morrises purchased four more properties which gave them space for constructing landscape features like English Park and Swan Pond and garden structures like Mercury Loggia and Seven Arches. In 1914, the Morrises expanded their estate once again with the addition of Bloomfield Farm. Thirty-four years later, the Arboretum gained four more acres with the purchase of Overlea, now Gates Hall.

A Map Worth Studying…Clematis Circle



Detail of 1914 Compton Atlas by Pugh & Hubbard, 2012.5.7 photoshopped

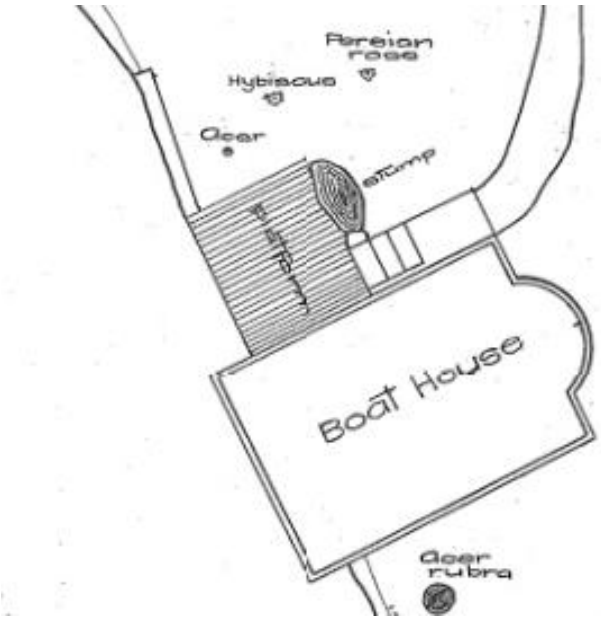
In 1914, as now, clematis was a highly desirable plant. Back then, a two-year old clematis could set a gardener back twenty-five cents at Lit Brothers in Philly. But the Morrises weren't satisfied with a solitary clematis draping the mailbox or trailing across Lydia's Seat.

Rather, they planted forty clematis in the middle of English Park in a perfect circle. Each clematis was planted next to a support for scrambling up. Some of the plants the Morrises chose were discovered in the 18th century, like *Angustifolia* (1787). Others were more recent discoveries or cultivars, like *The Duchess of Edinburgh* (1874), *Montana Rubens* (1884), and *Armandii* (1900). One rare type from Asia, made its way to Compton via Russia, by way of England. It was the yellow-flowered *Tangutica* (1898), whose droopy lanterns matured into shimmering mop-top seedheads. Walking around the circle of clematis in summers must have felt like being in a small-scale Stonehenge crowned with bowers of blossoms. Imagine the fragrance…and the bees!

Some people might say clematis is quite boring except while in bloom but that didn't prevent the Morrises from planting one genus in this garden. The clematis circle, like other gardens at Compton, was in keeping with the Morris's grand plan for their country landscape—to assemble a wide range of varieties and plant them by families and genera, or as John Morris told reporters in 1900, "to take in the whole estate of plant life rather than one special genus."

Standing sentinel in the center of clematis circle was one of the tallest of eastern hardwoods, a tulip poplar. Today, the bronze sculpture, *After BKB Iyengar,* occupies that space. And a few feet away, Step Fountain pays homage to the wide stairs that once led to a dazzling array of clematis.

A Map Worth Studying…The Morrises Boat House

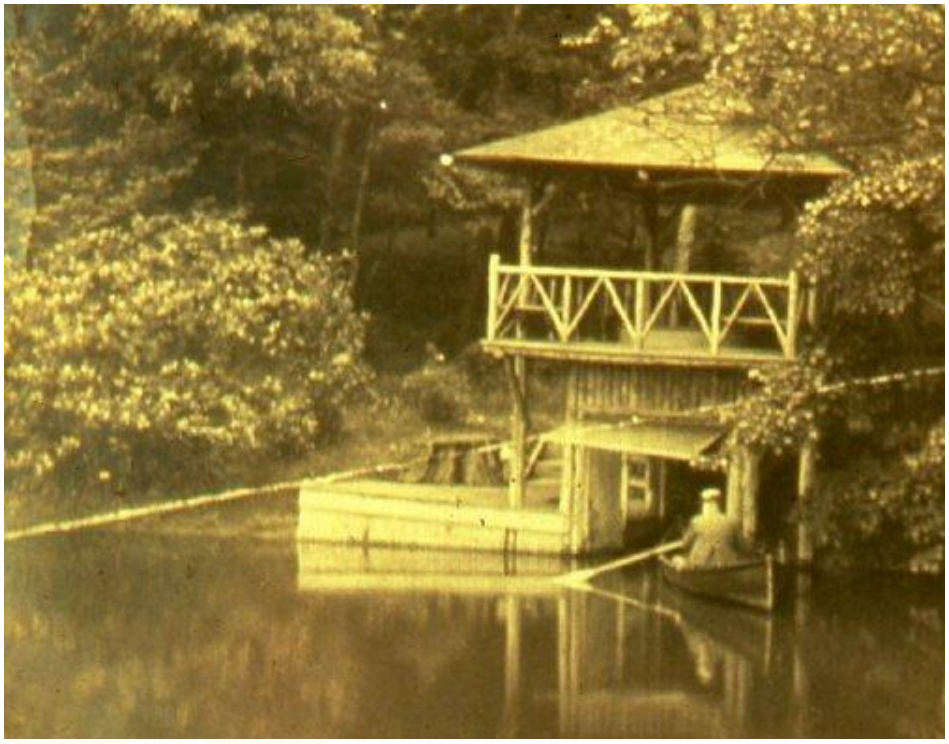


Detail of Compton Atlas, Pugh & Hubbard, 1909

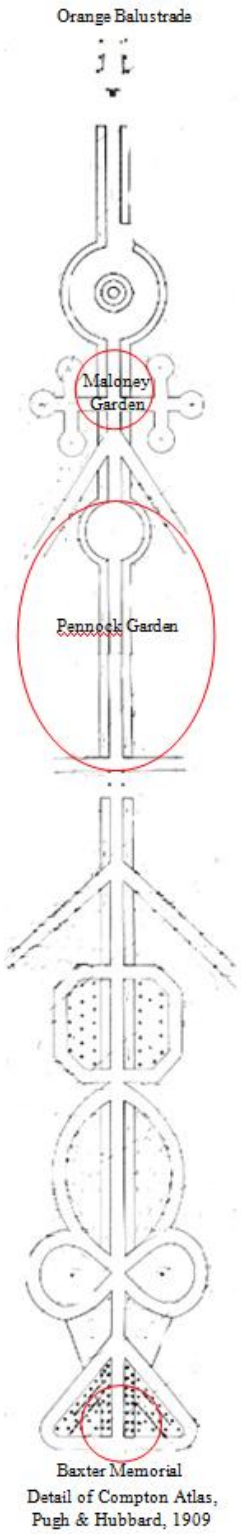
Soon after establishing the Compton estate, the Morrises built a rustic two-story boat house in a remote corner of the "south woods" on the banks of Wissahickon Creek. Similar to Orange Balustrade (constructed about the same time), the boat house harmonized well with its natural setting. It was framed with whole log posts that must have been twenty feet or longer. The boat slip, clad in slab siding on three sides and accessed by a wooden overhead door, was on the lower level; above the slip was a spacious veranda with a wide-overhang roof. The structure did not have running water or electricity. Clearly the Morris boat house was meant to be simple and utilitarian, in contrast with their elaborate stone mansion.

When the water was high enough, the boat could be rowed into the slip, otherwise the rower would need to step out of the boat and drag it in. On the creek side, the veranda extended over the water—like a rough-hewn juliet balcony—with simple log railing and backless benches suitable for fishing. Adjacent to the house was a floating platform, built around the stump of a felled tree.

A counterpoint to the stylish garden follies that the Morrises created later on the estate, the boat house was emblematic of the wholesomeness of country life in the 1890s. Until the Morris siblings moved to Chestnut Hill, they had never lived on a creek, but they enjoyed being on the water, whether creek, river or ocean; it only made sense to build a boat house, buy a boat, climb aboard and start paddling.



Morris boat house on Wissahickon Creek, circa 1900



Detail of Compton Atlas, Pugh & Hubbard, 1909

A Map Worth Studying…The Original Flower Walk

The Pennock Flower Walk, a signature attraction of the Arboretum, is dazzling when in bloom. But imagine five Pennock gardens, lined up end to end on the south slope, starting at the Orange Balustrade and ending at the Baxter Memorial.

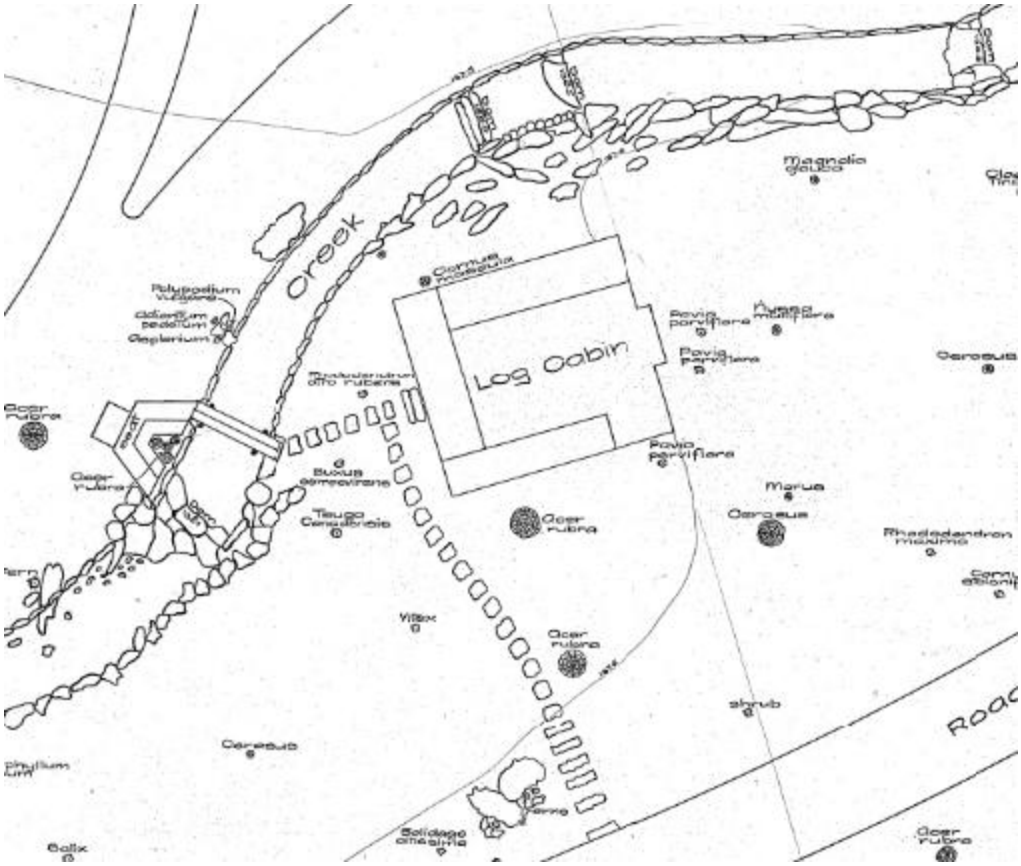
That's how long the original flower walk at Compton was—a staggering 475 feet, longer than a football field. Dazzle on sterioids.

Though not as tamed or intricate, the Morris's flower walk paid homage to the Baroque gardens of Italy and France, featuring geometric-shaped planting beds with a path straight through the center. The layout was scrupulously symmetrical, unlike the asymmetrical, nonlinear layout of much of the Compton estate—including the mansion itself. The flower walk was not just about the plants, it was about the precision of the design. Maintaining such a strong geometric design required regular pruning to ensure that plants and shrubs stayed within their borders.

We know what shrubs and trees were planted in each bed, thanks to the Compton atlases of 1909 and 1914, however it's impossible to know what herbaceous plants lined the borders. Woody perennials were selected with two design principles in mind: restrain and repeat. The trefoils (now the Maloney garden) held six hardy orange trees. The area near the current Pennock garden was planted with viburnum and farther down the slope, the cut-corner rectangle contained tree peonies. Perhaps the most informal garden was the fleur-de-lis with exotic bamboo and Oriental grasses in the top section and two native mountain silverbell trees in the lower.

To reach the flower walk, the Morrises and their visitors strolled over from the mansion and entered the side gate of the garden room surrounding the Orange Balustrade, crossed the footbridge and descended to the head of the walk. That's when the oohing and aahing commenced.

A Map Worth Studying…Taming East Brook



Detail of Compton Atlas, Pugh & Hubbard, 1909

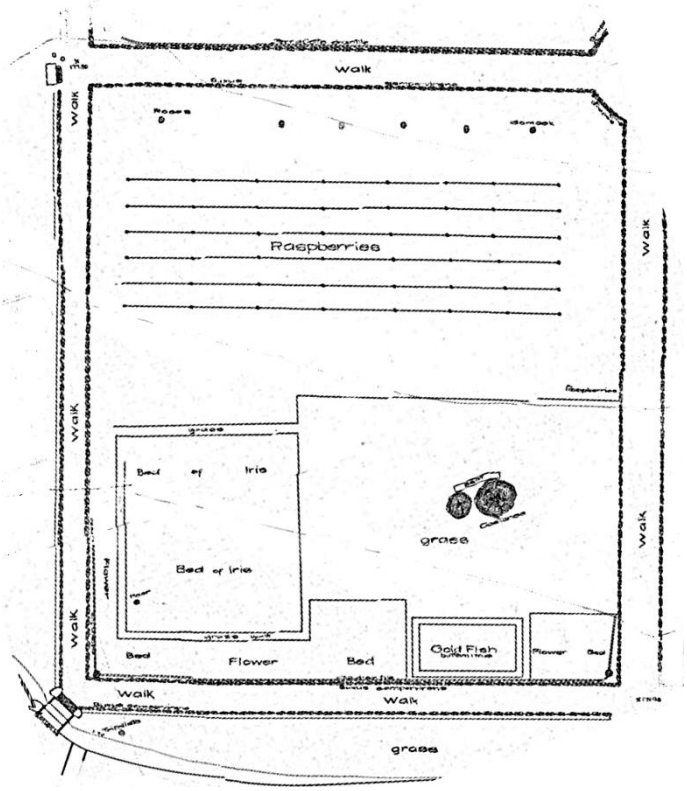
In 1920 a horticulturist in Glenside, Richard Rothe, introduced "Compton Garden" to members of the National Association of Gardeners in an article in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*. But instead of discussing the extensive collection of trees and shrubs or the fernery or rosarium, Rothe focused on the problem of East Brook, a winding stream on steep terrain, plagued by washouts.

Rothe described how the problem was addressed: "…fortunately, in its founder, owner, and designer, the late John T. Morris, Compton Garden had an artist fully competent to cope with the situation. The rockbed and the rocky shore lines of this stream of water constructed under personal direction of Mr. Morris cannot be pictured or described in a way to give the work justice. One needs to see and study the infinitely varied details along its natural course and the more we study the more we are forced to admire the subtlety of vision and the wonderfully clear conception of the elements of beauty in rocks and natural rock composition [at] the water

edge…When looking at the brook at Compton Garden it is to be borne in mind that the amiable character and simplicity in the composition of the scenery and the distinguished personality of John T. Morris are inseparable."

From the beginning, Morris realized that the brook running through the hilly ground of his estate needed to be dealt with, and instead of rudely re-channeling the stream, he took a naturalistic approach by grouping boulders to form high banks along its course. Some sections of rockwork on East Brook are simply functional, but around the log cabin, the rockwork is a piece of pure "brook poetry."

A Map Worth Studying…The Goldfish Tank



Detail of Compton Atlas, Pugh & Hubbard, 1909, photoshopped

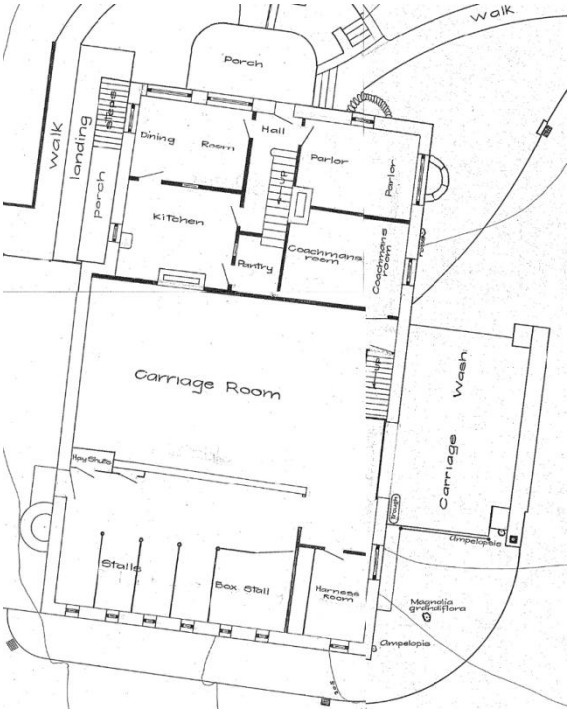
The foursquare garden adjacent to the Fernery is commonly called the "rose garden." However, prior to the 1920s, it was a multi-purpose garden, its four quadrants planted with an assortment of flowers, shrubs and berries. Early on, one of the quadrants contained a classic herb garden. By the time John Morris commissioned the 1909 atlas of Compton, the herbs had been replaced with formal flower beds and two additional quadrants had also been dedicated to flowers.

The fourth quadrant, shown above, held an interesting mix of raspberries, iris, and a goldfish pond—or more precisely—a goldfish tank. The tank, about two feet deep and likely built of

concrete, was constructed between flower beds at the lower edge of the garden, next to the boxwood-lined walk.

But this corner of the garden had an even more distinctive feature—an enormous chestnut tree with a double trunk. Judging from the 1909 and 1914 Compton atlases, this was the largest tree on the property, at a height of about 75 feet with a concomitant canopy spread. A rough-hewn bench straddled both trunks, a fine spot for John or Lydia Morris to rest awhile. Little did they know that soon, this grand tree, along with their other chestnut trees, would be killed by a fungus that had begun to infect trees on the East Coast. A photograph of this champion chestnut tree taken the same year as the atlas verifies just how grand it was (click here).

A Map Worth Studying…The Carriage House



Detail of Compton Atlas, Pugh & Hubbard, 1909

When John and Lydia Morris commissioned Theophilus Chandler to design their country mansion, they also commissioned a carriage house. Both buildings were asymmetrical and clad in rusticated stone, but Chandler's conception of the three-level carriage house differed from the mansion. With overhanging balconies, triangular knee braces, arched doors and diamond pane windows, the carriage house evoked the Arts & Crafts movement while the mansion was a throwback to English Gothic style. The Morrises paid $8,664 for design and construction of the carriage house, a fourth the cost of the mansion.

Originally, the carriage house had two living quarters—one for humans (the head gardener at first, later coachmen) and the other for horses, with a row of stalls, hay chute and harness room.

Just for the sake of perspective, the harness room was almost the size of the dining room. Between the two-story gardener's suite and the horse stalls was a spacious garage for carriages. Eventually the Morris's motor vehicles took the place of horses and carriages.

The carriage house continued to function as living quarters and garage until 1978 when it was renovated and renamed the Widener Education Center. See photos of the carriage house prior to renovation here and here.