Lydia Thompson Morris (1849–1932), Horticulturist

Lydia Morris was an educated, active, and forward-thinking woman whose passion for horticulture and stewardship of the land lives on in the beautiful gardens and vibrant educational and research programs of Morris Arboretum in Chestnut Hill. Lydia Morris and her brother John were born to a prominent Philadelphia Quaker family. Their father, Isaac Paschall Morris, was founder of the I. P. Morris Iron Works, initially at 16th and Market, later at Port Richmond and made his fortune manufacturing boilers, turbines and large machinery. John continued the business as President until his retirement in 1891.

Neither Lydia nor her brother, two years her senior, married. They went on their first international trip in 1881and continued traveling the world—Europe, Egypt, Greece, Asia, Norway and Russia—through 1910, but their many adventures always brought them back home to Philadelphia.

By the 1880s, urban sprawl of the Industrial Revolution had left its marks on their childhood summer home in Harrowgate and, eager to establish a new country estate, they purchased 26 acres in Chestnut Hill overlooking the Wissahickon Valley. Here, at "Compton," they built a mansion, carriage house, gardener's cottage, greenhouses, and extensive and eclectic gardens. Both brother and sister worked with a large gardening staff to develop the property that, by 1914, encompassed more than 166 acres.

Lydia shared her extraordinary gifts in the gardens she nurtured, in her active role in civic affairs and historic preservation, 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 addressing her as "fair friend."

In the course of their extensive world travels, the brother and sister amassed a wide-ranging collection of antiquities and artifacts, 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, Lydia continued to oversee the estate and, at her death in 1932, the property was bequeathed 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 Compton 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 demolished in 1968, a rustic log cabin built in 1908 as Lydia's private retreat has been restored. Its porch waits for visitors to sit and enjoy, as she did, the stream and woodlands.

By Melissa Tevere, unpublished

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As One Woman Sees It

By Sarah D. Lowrie

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One Saturday night early this winter, when I went over to greet Miss Lydia Morris at the Philadelphia Orchestra concert in that seat she has so long majestically occupied on the Locust street side of the parquet circle in the Academy of Music—and, alas, will occupy no more!—I thought her looking very ill. But, naturally, I refrained from even asking her how she was, since I knew her prejudices on that subject. What she was keen to speak about was the fact that she had arranged to have the University of Pennsylvania share for future generations of students in the inheritance of the great estate of Compton, out along the Wissahickon, beyond Chestnut Hill. Of course, by her brother John's will, and personal arrangement before his death, we all knew that the pleasure ground surrounding the house, which Miss Lydia and he occupied, were to be an arboretum and, with the farms beyond, eventually a school for the study of horticulture and tree culture and agriculture generally. But as to what the provisions for the carrying on of this enterprise would be a matter Miss Morris had never discussed with an outsider like myself in so frank a way as she felt inclined to do that evening. Indeed, she was brimming over with the idea, only cautioning me that until her death this was not a matter to be written about or made widely public.

She was a masterful person, was Miss Lydia, with both prejudices for and against many things which most of the rest of us accept or dismiss casually. She did not forget old occasions because of new ones, and conversing with her had something of the pattern of an obstacle race unless you were well aware of the paths of talk along which you could stroll with her without courting catastrophe. However, as those safe paths were also very pleasant ones, it was no chore to engage in a conversation with the owner of Compton, especially if you could sit in her sun porch in the midst of her bowers of blossoming plants and watch the cardinals and all of the other birds of the air which you supposed had gone South to avoid the winter, gaily disporting themselves along the vistas of the lawns.

Her passion for birds, her loyalty to every wish and desire and memory of her brother John, her real ability to manage a great piece of property and to shrewdly direct her many work people; the beautiful and valuable additions to the arboretum, which she made yearly; the lovely things which blossomed in their seasons along the grassy glades of that place; her fondness for the wide and lovely views of her place of summer sojourn at Lake Placid in the Adirondacks and the unalloyed joy that she had in the characteristics of the great trees which surrounded her Chestnut Hill house, either in their summer foliage or in their winter grace—these were charming topics of never-ending diversion upon which one could embark with her without any fear of conversational hitches.

I have never understood exactly why the generality of Philadelphians, even the generality of her acquaintances, were so little aware of the beauties that were in process of becoming on those slopes at Compton; the great collection of lilacs, of flowering cherries, of azaleas and shrubs of semitropic and semitemperate zones and so on almost indefinitely in the tree way (for so many trees not indigenous to these parts can still be made to grow here, given the right soil and sun and protection) were things to study in their perfection at Compton.

It wouldn't have been easy for most people, perhaps, to gain admission to those grounds on their own initiative and without some sort of a guide one might miss the significance of many of the plantations, especially as there were no visible paths in many instances. Miss Morris, who didn't care for walking, did what Mr. Benjamin Fairchild, of Connecticut, does in his great garden acres of trees and shrubs and plantations of wild flowers. She motored along the grassy slopes and up and down long vistas of her place by ways of sward paths and crisscross parallels known only to her chauffeur and to herself. The planting has been done so that at all seasons there can be new pleasures for the eye in some blossoming way, but she had her own red-letter days for special beauties, so that you were not asked to come haphazardly and at any hour that suited you to wander through the grounds.

I daresay she was as well aware of all that the changing seasons accomplished along the upper reaches of her farmlands on the river of the Wissahickon beyond Compton, but of the more serious side of horticulture I, for one, knew little about her preparations for the future usefulness of the place. Sometimes she would boast a little quite happily concerning the yield of milk or of truck-garden crops, but that would be only as an amused accompaniment of some pleasant, sumptuous meal of country dainties one had at her table.

It seems obvious that one of the inherited traits of Quaker families of today, most enjoyable to their friends and acquaintances, should be the pleasure of the table. The best of everything as to quality was none too good for these set-apart folk dedicated to simplicity. Nowhere, I think is that preparedness for culinary triumph more apparent than in that house of many generations of Quakers, Cedar Grove, Miss Morris' gift to Fairmount Park. That homestead is the best example that I know of the mixture of good living and of stern limitation that the generations of today can study at first hand.

It was perhaps twenty-five or thirty years ago, when the house was still used as the family country place by John Morris and his sister, that all those luscious meals were still cooked on the open hearth by servants who were trained not to deviate by a single spoonful from the traditional recipes of dishes long noted for their delicious and filling qualities. No doubt it was a fad to insist on such simplicity of surrounds, with such meticulous demands as to results, but the Morris servants knew their business and enjoyed the technique of it in the old style, also no doubt. At any rate, as an illustration of how great a part tradition can play in family life in spite of the changes and chances of growing wealth and more sophistication of worldly conditions, Cedar Grove is a valuable asset to the historians of the Philadelphia of yesterday, and even of today.

I came across the other day a confession of faith in ancestral motives and methods by a fellow citizen which I found almost as illuminating as is Cedar Grove itself in this matter of inherited responsibility. I quote it as I found it at the end of some biographical papers sent me recently by a man whose ancestors played a large part in the history of the settlement of Philadelphia, and whose descendants are giving promise of an equal position in more worldly ways.

Here is an excerpt from an autobiographical sketch:

"While getting together material for this genealogical work I came across, among my father's old papers, a testimonial to my great-great-grandfather, in which he was most highly commended by the Overseers of the Monthly Meeting. From this time until my own, my forebears have all led exemplary lives and been good citizens with deep religious convictions, as members of the

Society of Friends. For four generations backward my forebears have been overseers or elders in the meeting. With the advantages of this inheritance, without any undue claim, one has an obligation to follow as nearly as possible in their footsteps and pass good principles on to the next generation. Due consideration of change of conditions and surrounds must be acknowledged, but with other advantages offsetting, one cannot be justified by excuses in stepping too much to one side from the straight course."

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