



Morris Arboretum & Gardens

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

Morris Arboretum: From Birth to Dedication

Morris Arboretum & Gardens is celebrating 90 years connecting plants, people, and place. To commemorate this momentous anniversary, Joyce H. Munro, a Morris volunteer and former Dean of Graduate Studies at Chestnut Hill College, writes of events leading up to the public opening of the Morris Arboretum in June 1933.

October 1932

The autumn of 1932 was bleak for many Philadelphians. A quarter of the city's work force was out of work, families faced eviction from their homes, and children were going hungry. Three years had passed since the "Great Crash" on Wall Street and still the city was suffering the aftermath.

The President of the University of Pennsylvania, [Thomas S. Gates](#), spoke frankly of the city's gloomy circumstances at opening convocation on October 1. But he saw evidence of some good coming out of distressing times—people were reevaluating the essentials of life. They were seeking to help those who suffered the most and searching for better ways to find satisfaction than making money fast and spending it even faster. This from a former financier with J.P. Morgan!

Another good thing happened in Philadelphia that autumn—the birth of Morris Arboretum. And Gates was instrumental in bringing it about. He had met with Lydia T. Morris the previous year to discuss the possibility of the Botanical Department using Compton and Bloomfield for field study. In the end, Gates got much more than permission to use the facilities—Lydia bequeathed her estate to Penn.

Nine months after her death, when the colors of autumn were on the wane, Lydia's bequest became official—Botany gained a new habitat for botanizing and the head of the department, [Dr. Rodney H. True](#), was named director. That November, Gates inspected the grounds, dealt with the transfer, and made plans for a three-day celebration come spring. What better way to refresh depression-weary residents than invite them to stroll through resplendent gardens they had read about but never seen. Every tree and shrub a symbol that normalcy was returning to their city.

Next June...when the dark days of winter were over.



Thomas Gates inspecting a Sargent oak at Compton, November 1932 (Morris Arboretum & Gardens Archives [2004.1.533](#))



Gates inspecting an Austrian pine at Compton, November 1932 (Morris Arboretum & Gardens Archives 2014.40.56)

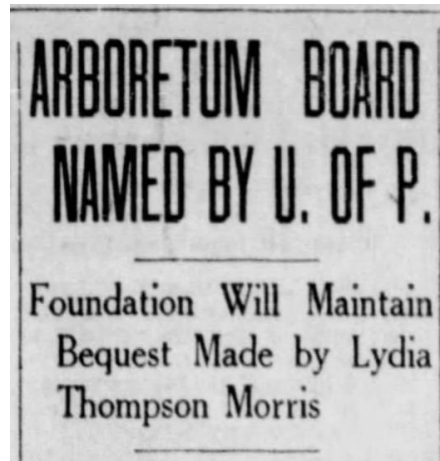
Read more about Gates' pursuit of Compton [here](#).



November 1932

One month after [President Thomas Gates](#) toured the [property](#) bequeathed to the University of Pennsylvania by Lydia Morris, his office issued a press release: the new Arboretum had a new advisory board. Word was spreading about the University's good fortune and Gates needed to assure the public that they were ready and able to put Miss Morris's property into use.

However, the University did not determine the composition of the board, or for that matter, the organizational structure of the Arboretum. Lydia made those decisions. She defined how the Arboretum was to be maintained in her will and Penn was obligated to follow through with her plans or risk the disapproval of the Morris Foundation.



The Philadelphia Inquirer, November 2, 1932, p. 3
(archived at Newspapers.com)

Essentially, Lydia specified a bicameral system of oversight and operation—an advisory board and an administrative committee. She also directed that her personal attorney, [Maurice Bower Saul](#), serve as Counsel to the board and her personal secretary serve as board Secretary.

Ten months after Lydia's death, Gates released the names of board members. They included a banker, an investment company officer, a financier, a physician, and a commercial nursery owner. All of them had been acquainted with Lydia. She would have been pleased with their selection; confident that they would make wise decisions about the estate she and her brother, John, had developed for half a century.

In addition to laying out the organizational structure, Lydia established scientific and educational purposes of her bequest, with botanical research heading the list. One thing Lydia was not adamant about—what to call her estate in the future. She referred to it as her “country place” but either “public park” or “arboretum” was fine with her.



December 1932



New pathology lab in Compton mansion (Morris Arboretum & Gardens Archives 2004.1.784)

December of 1932 was a season of great joy in Philadelphia. Society pages were filled with announcements of parties and dinners, DeMille's melodrama, "The Sign of the Cross," was on at the Aldine Theatre and Gimbel's was open until 9 pm. Not to be outdone, Strawbridge & Clothier's chorus performed in the store every night.

But December was also a season of great plight. The city was out of cash and couldn't pay employees, "hunger marchers" were camping out at City Hall, emergency aid centers were running out of coats, and Morris Arboretum was running out of coal, plus the roof of the Compton mansion was leaking.

[Rodney H. True](#), recently appointed Director of the Arboretum, had barely settled into his office in the mansion when he was obliged to send UPenn's Vice President a memo, asking who should order coal and who should repair the roof. But on a more positive note, True wrote to [John G. Jack](#) at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston requesting help to expand the Morris's nascent Herbarium. Jack, self-educated lecturer, writer, and plant collector extraordinaire, was just wrapping up 46 years at Arnold and he was more than happy to send any duplicate plant specimens to the newbie Arboretum.

Ironically, Thomas S. Gates, UPenn's President, had just released a statement to reporters that could only be read as a challenge to the Arnold: "Philadelphia may soon be recognized as the botanical center of the world." Gates' prediction made newspapers across the U.S. and likely raised a few eyebrows up in Boston—after all, John Morris had exchanged plants and advice for over a decade with Arnold's long-time director, [Charles S. Sargent](#) and plant explorer, [E.H.](#)

[Wilson](#). Then after John's death, his sister Lydia carried on the exchange. Truth be told, Compton wouldn't have been nearly as attractive to UPenn without the Arnold's contribution of seeds and plants through the years.



January 1933

Ninety years ago, when a garden club wanted a first-rate illustrated talk, they invited [John C. Wister](#). He could take club members to the pine forests of Germany, the lavender fields of France, the mixed flower borders of England and the formal gardens of Italy with his [hand-tinted lantern slides](#). Then with a quick change of slides, he could bring the audience home to Philadelphia for a tour of Mrs. Lloyd's iris beds or Mrs. Taylor's boxwood enclosed gardens at Boxley. What Wister didn't know about gardens and flowers wasn't worth knowing, they used to say.

But in January of 1933 Wister wasn't lecturing, he was talking to newspaper reporters about plans for a new arboretum in the Philadelphia area—an arboretum comparable to the best in the US. This may sound vaguely familiar. Several months earlier, UPenn's President Thomas Gates had made a similar statement to the press about the new Morris Arboretum. However, Wister wasn't referring to Morris, he was introducing another fledgling arboretum, twenty miles south—the Arthur Hoyt Scott Horticultural Foundation, today called the [Scott Arboretum](#) of Swarthmore College.



Felled trees in Crum Woods, Wister lantern slide
(McLean Library, Philadelphia Horticultural Society)

Actually, the founding of Scott Arboretum predates the Morris. When Wister was appointed Director in 1930, he began thinning out the woods adjacent to campus in order to plant hundreds of seedlings, and by 1933 Wister was ready to announce plans to go public. With the goal of demonstrating practical landscaping to homeowners, the Scott would be a counterpoint to the Morris's global collection of woody specimens.

Meanwhile, at Morris Arboretum that January, Director Rodney True and UPenn administrators were busy selecting dates for dedication ceremonies, lining up speakers and compiling invitation lists of distinguished horticulturists.

And yes, John C. Wister was on the list.



Compton estate in winter (Morris Arboretum & Gardens Archives 2004.1.21)



February 1933

February 1933 marked the beginning of active research at the newly-organized Morris Arboretum. Director [Rodney H. True](#) submitted his first budget to UPenn's VP Brakeley and it was an ambitious one. After all, scientific research did not come cheap. Brakeley called it a "first rate" budget, but he was obligated to inform True that expenditures had to be kept at a minimum since the Arboretum did not have a steady source of income yet. Only certain items necessary for conducting research would be approved, like a microscope, centrifuge, autoclave, pH scale, and a bus.

And why a bus? Before specimens could be analyzed they had to be gathered, and that meant getting in a vehicle and going someplace to collect interesting vegetation, preferably something rare or novel. True and his colleagues in the Department of Botany called it botanizing.

[John Bartram](#), a Colonial-era Philadelphian, was quite familiar with botanizing—he went up and down the East Coast for thirty years, charting the terrain and exploring the flora. In 1765, Bartram headed south on his [final trip](#). Despite a bout with malaria, he trudged through swamps and climbed sand hills, gathering specimens of palmetto, magnolia, sweet bay, pine, and live oak and stitching them to paper. This trip lasted nine months—Arboretum trips lasted just a week, with nights spent in tourist cabins along the way.

Sorry to tell you this, but True did not get a new bus right away. The rickety old UPenn bus, in use since the 1920s, had to be pressed into service once again. True had no choice but to climb aboard and hope it didn't break down en route because the Arboretum faculty and their students had a mammoth task ahead: "to assemble at Compton the most complete herbarium of woody plants that it is possible to collect," as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that February.



Laboratory in basement kitchen of Compton (Morris Archives 2004.1.9451s)



March 1933

The birth of an Arboretum is a momentous event but it can also be tedious. Let's look over the shoulder of Director Rodney True, hard at work in his office and find out how things are going in March 1933. He has just three months to go until dedication ceremonies in June.

Fountain pen in hand, True jots down yet another to-do list for the three-day event. He and his colleagues have chosen two botanists, one in Manitoba, Canada and the other in New York City, to present at the scientific session on dedication day. He needs to get their letters of invitation in the mail. The guest list for this session is still a work in progress, and as expected, it just keeps growing. Botanists around the world are on the list, although it's not likely that everyone will be able to attend, given the volatile state of global affairs.


There are oodles of on-site matters to deal with, like grounds-keeping, transportation, tour arrangements, and where to erect the canvas marquees. At this point, True is probably breathing a sigh of relief that he's not in charge of other to-dos like selecting songs for the University band or drafting the program. He pauses to draft a memo to VP Brakeley about hiring a new employee to assist in the Herbarium.

If that's not enough to keep True busy, he is still negotiating the Arboretum budget with UPenn administrators and he has yet to prepare the script for his radio talk on the topic, "Gardens of Trees," scheduled for broadcast around the nation in a few weeks.

They say March comes in like a lion, out like a lamb. Maybe things will calm down for Rodney True in days ahead but right now, he has a myriad of to-dos before the month is out.



Rodney H. True at his desk at UPenn, 1925, courtesy of Penn Archives



April 1933

Early in April 1933, Rodney True received word that 3000 mounted plant specimens from China were on the way to Morris Arboretum. Just two months into his new job as Arboretum Director, True was extremely busy revising the budget (yet again) and arranging dedication ceremonies (only seven weeks to go) and now he had to figure out where to store the specimens and who would catalog them.

Granted, the Arboretum wasn't receiving the entire collection of 30,000 specimens—a number of arboreta and botanical gardens across the US were sharing in the largess. But it still created space and personnel issues that True had to solve in a matter of days. On top of that, reporters from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wanted to interview him.

True found space and hired an assistant and gave the interview. The headline on April 16 read: "Morris Arboretum to Receive Plants Collected in Asia" and the name of the collector appeared in the first paragraph: Joseph F. Rock. This was a major story, not just because the plants were from China, but the person who collected them had a reputation among botanists as an intrepid, cocky plant explorer. (Learn more about this extraordinary plant hunter [here](#).)



Plant experts examine specimens from Rock's expedition to China
The San Francisco Examiner, March 21, 1933, p. 5 (Newspapers.com)

Rock's expeditions were long, costly, and dangerous, which is why his entourage included cooks, porters, and armed guards. Among the belongings he took along were folding tables and chairs, linens, dinnerware, a leopard-skin rug, and a collapsible bathtub. Rock had no academic degrees (though he was referred to as Dr. Rock) but his work was meticulous and his articles for *National Geographic* were thoroughly researched and highly readable.

Food poisoning, bandits, terrible weather—juxtaposed with breath-taking vistas of snow-capped mountains, deep forests, and alpine meadows. His diaries reveal a love-hate relationship with China that lasted over thirty years. Did I mention that Rock always took his hand-cranked phonograph along so he could play his favorite Caruso records? I can't wait for the movie about this character!



Plant specimen collected by Rock in China (courtesy U.S. National Herbarium)



May 1933

The formal ceremony uniting Morris Arboretum and the University of Pennsylvania on June 2 was only a month away. With time dwindling, the Arboretum Director and Board of Advisers were still dealing with where to park cars, how to guide guests from the main gate to the ceremony venue, and what to do in case of rain. Fortunately, the local Boy Scout troop and Penn Botany students had been recruited to help. On top of all this, Penn's President, a City Council member and an official of the U.S. Department of Agriculture were coming to the Arboretum for a private tour.

The guest list for Friday morning's academic session and afternoon dedication ceremony was limited to a select group of tenured Penn professors, administrators, city officials, and Botanists around the world. Invitations had gone out, with maps and train schedules tucked in for out-of-town guests. The two speakers for the academic session had been warned that they wouldn't be able to lecture with lantern slides—proceedings would be conducted under a big tent on the east lawn.

On campus, the University orchestra was rehearsing for the afternoon ceremony. Musical selections included pieces by Victor Herbert, Leo Delibes, Alexandre Luigini, and one piece of incidental music aptly titled, "Morris Dance" by Edward German. The procession would be to Meyerbeer's "Coronation March," a lively piece that might tempt university and civic dignitaries to gallop down the aisle, except for the fact that they'd be walking on the grassy slopes of the Arboretum. Speaking of which, the gardeners were busy from 7 AM to 5 PM each day, mowing, pruning, and planting for the biggest three-day party ever held on the grounds.



Officials tour the Arboretum in May, 1933
(Morris Arboretum 2006.1.83.1)



June 1933

Over the course of a three-day weekend in June 1933, a family's private property came into the care and administration of a university. The owners of the property, siblings John and Lydia Morris, were gone now; it was time to carry out their wish that the estate become a public arboretum.

When the gates of the great iron fence opened to the public for the first time ever that Sunday, crowds rushed in to glimpse the priceless collection of exotic trees and shrubbery and flowers they had long admired through fence rails. More than one person in attendance that weekend called it a marriage made in heaven. Truth be told, it was actually a calculated decision involving powers of persuasion. And in the end, mutual interests prevailed—the estate would be a place dedicated to the search for scientific truth amid pleasant surroundings of beauty and color.

The [dedicatory speech](#) made by Dr. Rodney H. True, Director of the Arboretum, gives us a sense of how this union would be carried out. The Morris's vast collection of woody plants was a trust to be studied and shared and expanded, True said, and the University's Botany Department was ready to take on the task. He named four groups who would benefit from this marriage: botanists would learn about plant dynamics, landscapers about new varieties of ornamental plants, forestry specialists about ecological uses of trees, and nature lovers about the beauties and mysteries of plant life.

True predicted that the Arboretum would change as it engaged in new functions—new facilities would be erected, new equipment installed, and new staff hired. But he acknowledged that this was only the beginning and he posed a question to the audience: *What vision will struggle to condense itself into reality as the years come and go?*

Ninety years later, True's question has been answered once again with the Arboretum's new name, new image, and a renewed emphasis on beauty and color.

