

The Morris Arboretum & Gardens Swans

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Elsa and Lohengrin, Ariel and Titania,
Bonnie and Clyde, Flora and Fauna

These famed pairs of the genus *Cygnus* once resided at the pond of Morris Arboretum & Gardens. Admired by visitors, their beauty and elegance have inspired photographers and painters, musicians and poets.

This is the swans' story.

THE OPERA STARS

Elsa and Lohengrin, the first pair of swans, arrived well before the arboretum was established, when John and Lydia Morris were enhancing their estate with gardens and landscape features. In fact, the pond was brand new when a Massachusetts game farm delivered the swans in 1905.



Lydia Morris with Elsa and Lohengrin in their newly constructed habitat. MA&G Archives photo 2013.209.1

The swans' names come from Richard Wagner's opera, which, as it happens, was performed at the Philadelphia Academy of Music that January. Picture Lydia, a season ticket-holder, sitting in her seat in the "parquet circle," eyes glued to the stage as Lohengrin sings his sad farewell to Elsa.

As is usual with swans, Elsa and Lohengrin had a clutch of cygnets (baby swans) each spring, swelling the family to six or seven until the offspring were old enough to give away. On occasion, John and Lydia fed the swans from the steps of the marble temple at the pond and the story is told that the swans answered to their names.



Elsa and Lohengrin on the pond beside the “little temple” circa 1910. MA&G Archives photo 2004.1.69

THE TRIO

At the close of a long and leisurely life, Elsa and Lohengrin swam their final lap around the pond and Lydia replaced them with three swans purchased from an exotic animal importer in New York City in 1923. Lydia’s head gardener escorted the three new inhabitants to the pond where they, along with three ducks, were [photographed](#) near the temple. To augment their diet of pond vegetation, the swans were fed bread and suet. Their names are not known but Lydia likely named them, as she did for many of the living creatures on the estate, including dogs, cows, and peacocks.

In July 1931, Lydia made a firm commitment to bequeath the Morris estate to the University of Pennsylvania and began arranging for the cows and other livestock to be sold. When the University took over the estate six months later, only a few animals remained on the property.

By relocating the cows, pets and swans to other places, Lydia paved the way for the Morris arboretum to focus on horticultural science, as she stipulated in her will. In the early days of the Arboretum, mallards and wood ducks took up residence on the pond and sightings were reported in the *Arboretum Bulletin*.

THE ROYALS

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the pond remained swan-less until the arboretum was offered a gift too significant to refuse—a brace (pair) of swans from the city of Ottawa, Canada, descendant from Queen Elizabeth’s swans in England. Ottawa’s unconventional gift was on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the founding of Philadelphia and city officials quickly identified the pond at the arboretum as the swans’ ideal home.

The arrival of the royal swans in 1982 was celebrated with an invitation-only ceremony featuring speeches by dignitaries of both cities and music by a brass quintet. The new swans were released into the water as two Canadian foot soldiers stood guard on the pond steps. Stories of this international act of swan-diplomacy were in newspapers across the U.S., in Canada and Britain.



A royal welcome for Ariel and Titania in 1982. MA&G Archives photo 2004.1.108

The royal swans were named Ariel and Titania (after characters in Shakespeare's plays) by the winner of a "Name the Swans" contest. The following spring, five cygnets were born to Ariel and Titania, with more to come each May.

The royals were mute swans, native to Europe. Despite the species name, they hissed and snorted, though not as loudly as trumpeter swans. Their most noticeable feature—an orange bill with prominent black knob—distinguished them from North American swans.

It's unfortunate the Canadian soldiers couldn't continue standing guard at the pond because Ariel and Titania tended to wander, until a proper fence was installed. After the death of Titania, Ariel was rehomed in Maryland.

THE MISFITS

Most swan pairs are temperamentally compatible and mate for life. Not so with the next couple that moved onto the pond in 1995. They were the second gift by the city of Ottawa but this time fanfare was minimal. As the unnamed swans settled in, arboretum staff and volunteers began noticing how feisty both the "cob" (male) and "pen" (female) were. It didn't take long to decide on their names—Bonnie and Clyde.

These companions could get quite noisy and with their seven-foot wing span, no one wanted to interfere when they got into a spat. Bonnie and Clyde were good foragers; however, like Ariel and Titania, wanderlust was in their DNA. A new fence and viewing area were installed in 2005 which may have led to yet another spat.

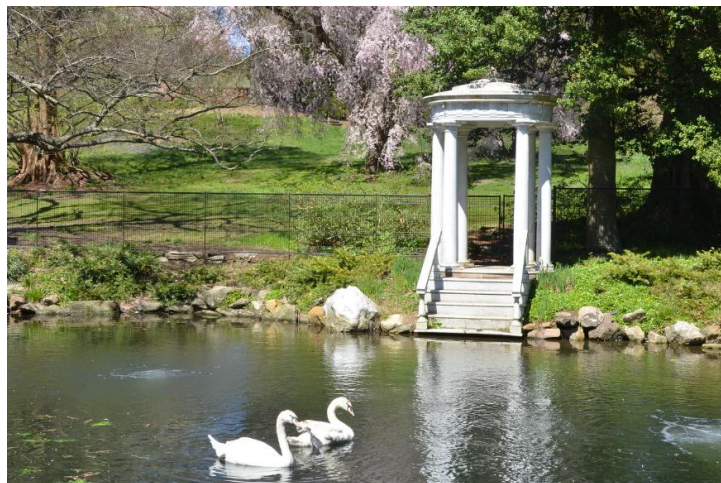


Bonnie and Clyde in the winter of 1988. Photo by Nick Kelsh

Unfortunately, Bonnie was lost in an accident the following year and Clyde swam alone, feisty as ever, never answering to his name. Eventually a new home was found for Clyde.

THE SISTERS

In the spring of 2012, the arboretum welcomed a pair of sister swans, the gift of Nicholas and Athena Karabots of Karamoor Estate. This time the arboretum held an online “Name our New Swans” contest and three contestants chose the same names for the pair—Flora and Fauna. Temperamentally, the sisters were opposites; one was docile, the other high-spirited.



Flora and Fauna on their first day at Morris Arboretum in 2012. Photo by Paul Meyer on flickr

The graceful sisters floated on the calm waters of the pond for many years, occasionally posing beak to beak, their curved necks forming a heart. The arboretum provided an ideal habitat for them, fed them well, and treated them humanely; however, it was not possible to keep them totally safe from harm. When Fauna was tragically lost in 2026, the decision was made to relocate Flora to a more secure environment.

THE WILD ONES

While the pond is no longer the year-round residence of swans, it continues to be an ideal habitat for other waterfowl like wood ducks and hooded mergansers, egrets and blue herons.

John and Lydia Morris wouldn't mind because they intended for a variety of waterfowl to share the pond. In 1905, when the Morrises purchased a brace of swans, they also purchased wood ducks—a native, migratory species with colorful plumage that was close to extinction at the time.

Today, the Morris Pond provides a safe nesting and feeding habitat for native waterfowl, and in turn, these water-loving birds help the arboretum maintain a healthy ecosystem.



Wood duck on the pond. Photo by Bob Gutowski on flickr

This essay is for Debbie Carr, garden educator at the Morris, who had a deep appreciation for creatures and plants and place and was always mindful of their connections and their history.

Sources include historic ledgers, work logs, invoices, newsletters, clippings and photographs in the Archives of Morris Arboretum & Gardens.