Untold Stories of Compton

Joyce H. Munro
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Abstract
Before it was known as an arboretum, the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania was a private estate called Compton. As with any "country seat," many hands were needed to keep things operating smoothly for the owners, John T. Morris (1847-1915) and his sister Lydia T. Morris (1849-1932). For forty-five years, from the Gilded Age through the Great Depression, the Compton estate was run by employees who planted the gardens, cooked meals, drove the limousine, served tea, milked cows, and paid bills.

Thanks to this workforce, the grounds were turned from barren to lush and the estate became a showplace. The author draws on her extensive study of historical documents and genealogical records to interpret the lives of Compton employees and associates during the early 1900s. New research findings and sources are included. Today, the Morris Arboretum is an internationally known public garden and educational institution.

Keywords
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Untold Stories of Compton

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Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania
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Dear reader,

Joyce Munro’s *Untold Stories of Compton* are creative literary works, set as gardens of imagination in a landscape of extensive and factual research. Her research sources included the Morris Arboretum’s archives, various libraries, other public collections, genealogical databases, personal interviews, and private collections. Some of her private collection sources have not before been researched. In the course of her story quest, Joyce has discovered new facts to inform our understanding of the history of the Morris Arboretum, giving voice to the time and people who shaped it. These essays bring to life the people of Compton, including those who served in house and garden, appreciated, but unseen.

Publishing this collection of stories is a milestone itself, marking how far the Morris Arboretum’s archive and history program has developed as a resource for research, frequently accessed by staff and others, in-person and online. Like many of our programs, volunteers are critical to success. The history and archive volunteers, happily including Joyce, have made our archive collections a regional resource for local history as well as contributing to international publications on garden history. We hope you enjoy these *Untold Stories of Compton*. I feel certain they will not be the last.

Kind Regards,

Bob Gutowski

*Director of Education and Visitor Experience*
Introduction

The Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is an award-winning public garden, a stunning place where something is always growing, perched on a bluff that was facetiously called “barren from time immemorial.” The Arboretum has undergone many transformations since it was given to the University of Pennsylvania in 1932. But before that, the Arboretum was a private summer home called Compton, and its grounds were resplendent with plant life collected from around the world.

Many people worked at Compton, which, over time, grew from twenty-six to ninety-two acres. Thanks to this workforce, the grounds were turned from barren to lush and the house became a home. The work was diverse and essential, particularly when Compton’s owners were in residence; work like cooking meals in the basement of the manor house, harvesting hay for the cattle, mucking out the stalls, planting rare specimen trees, feeding the swans, paying bills, dusting eighteenth century furniture, dressing the mistress, driving the master to his offices. And what do we know about the employees who did the work? For that matter, what do we know about John and Lydia Morris—the brother and sister who once owned this place—other than assorted facts?

When I started delving into Compton in 2015, these were not my questions. I was interested solely in learning the fate of the four-story house that once stood on the highest point of the property—the house called “lovely” by some people and “unfortunate” by others. I wanted to know why opinions were divided about its appearance; after all, the architect was none other than Theophilus P. Chandler, Jr., whose homes were the perfect habitation for Philadelphians living the gilded life. I wanted to know why this Chandler house was demolished in 1968 despite the protest of some individuals. The outcome of my prying into the house’s demise is the speculative story, “No Ordinary Property,” included in this book.

Although my focus was on Compton’s stone arches, walnut staircases, and stained glass windows, I couldn’t help but encounter the people who worked in and around this edifice. And before long I was drawn into their stories. The sisters who worked as maids at the Morris’s town home and country home. The head gardener who mentored more than forty “under-gardeners.” The business manager who left a position with the U.S. Department of Treasury to work for Lydia Morris. The attorney whose law firm still exists. The nurse, the cook, the landscaper. From Ireland, England, Scotland, Italy. These were individuals who knew Compton inside and out. It was their workplace. And a new project was born—telling their untold stories.

So just how did I discover these individuals? I found out about some of them in records at the Morris Arboretum Archives and by interviewing Archivist Leslie Morris-Smith. Once I knew their names and dates of employment, I was able to build their family trees online. And with that, their lives opened up—when they immigrated to America, who
their brothers and sisters were, when they were employed and what became of them in later years. I’ve seen their naturalization papers, whom and when they married, their whereabouts decade by decade. What saddens me is how few photographs of this band of Compton employees I’ve been able to locate. And it’s not for lack of trying, contacting family history societies, even emailing descendants.

But I’ve seen a few photographs along the way that are brief glimpses into their lives. Like the photo of a relative Mike Jeffers sends me one day. I click it and here is Jim O’Neil, the chauffeur, standing “at ease” next to Lydia Morris’s Pierce Arrow. And he’s wearing livery and a grin and all I can say is “Wow.” So this is the person who spent World War I hauling soldiers or fuel or ammunition in France, whose career, once back in the states, was hauling his employer around town. Then there’s the photo of the pocket watch Lydia gave her business manager after only three years on the job, which she enigmatically inscribed: Thank you. And I spend many a day trying to figure out, thank you for what?

The absence of stories of gardeners from Japan might make you think they have been ignored. This is not the case. True, they were short-term employees at Compton but I had hoped to introduce one of them to you. We know three of their names from horticultural journal articles—Y Muto, Sato, Furukawa. Unfortunately, their stories remain untold because their identities have been impossible to establish. However, there are a few clues about Y Muto who worked at Compton on three occasions, and these are offered in lieu of a definitive essay.

Here are the stories of men and women who made it possible for John Thompson Morris and his sister Lydia Thompson Morris to relax at their enchanting “country seat” during the warm season. I hope you find these able and loyal employees as interesting as I have.

But the untold stories of Compton would not be complete without some stories about the owners themselves. “No Ordinary Property” and “To Start a School” help bring these wise and farsighted siblings to life.

And all because of love, one more story must be told. “Jetta, a Love Story of Compton” is an appropriate ending, foreshadowing the many marriage proposals, engagements and weddings that have occurred in this intimate setting since the days it was called Compton.

Joyce H. Munro

Silver “green man” paper clip owned by Lydia T. Morris
The First Head Gardener

Fire Among the Flowers!, “Hot House Burned,” read the distressing headlines. It’s not often a fire in a greenhouse makes the newspapers. But this one was newsworthy because of its location. In the early hours of January 11, 1895, the Palm House on the Compton estate went up in flames. And even more distressing, it was a new facility. “Large and handsome” reporters called it—fitted with modern equipment and filled with specimen plants, some quite rare. The amount of damage varied widely; one reporter stating $1,500, another $5,000, a third topping out at $12,000. John T. Morris, owner of the greenhouse, had just left for a trip abroad with his sister, Lydia, and their nurse/diaryist, Louise Kellner. John learned about the blaze by telegram.

Morris’s gardener spoke candidly to reporters about how impossible it was for fire engines to get down the steep hill to the greenhouse because of icy conditions. But he was at a loss to explain how the fire started—he had checked the previous evening and all was in “perfect order.”

To say the Palm House was new is an understatement. Just three months earlier, its construction was touted in *American Gardening*: “Mr. John T. Morris, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, gardener Patrick Finnerty, is having a greenhouse erected by Hitchings & Co., which, on completion, will be used for decorative plants.”

Imagine double-thick glass panes for maximum light on short winter days. Imagine steady humidity from perforated pipes running the whole length. Imagine ventilation atop and around. Imagine curvilinear. Imagine everyone’s distress the day after the fire.

Patrick Finerghty (variously spelled Finnerty, Finerty) had worked at Compton for two years when his employer added this ambitious project to the to-do list. No doubt, such a complicated greenhouse required extensive instruction for operating the corrugated fire-box boiler and hot water apparatus and sash-lifting devices, innovations that won the Hitchings Company top awards at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago.

It’s unclear how Finerghty trained for such a high-profile gardener position. After immigrating to Philadelphia from Ireland at age eighteen, he likely learned on-the-job. In 1860 he was a farm laborer for Richard Pierce in Germantown and by 1880 he had worked his way up the gardener ladder to a position with Stephen S. Price, merchant and amateur horticulturist at Fern Rock.
(ancestral home of abolitionist/lawyer Thomas Leiper Kane).

Not long after fire ravaged Morris’s greenhouse, Patrick Finerghty left Compton and Morris began making arrangements for a new head gardener.

The Long-Serving Servant

She had no idea back in 1850 she was beginning something that would make the newspapers one day. In fact, she made the newspapers several times through the years. And later when she was an octogenarian, facing reporters yet again, she still couldn’t understand why anyone wanted to write about her. As she modestly told them, “I’ve done my work the best I knew how and had the kindest treatment, and that’s all there is to it.”

Au contraire. There was more to it than just doing her work. What made her story newsworthy was how long she had been doing her work. Ellen Hume was one year away from her diamond jubilee in 1909 when reporters interviewed her at 826 Pine Street. Fifty-nine years of service to the Morris family—that was her claim to fame. And though she protested mildly that her story was not worth telling, she had plenty to say about the current servant problem. She knew exactly what caused it: modern mistresses didn’t know anything about housekeeping, therefore they weren’t able to manage servants properly and servants didn’t know anything about housekeeping, therefore they went to work in stores and factories. Mistresses and servants wanted the same things, like fine dresses and freedom. Hence the servant problem.

What’s more, Ellen knew how to solve the problem of servants who wasted time by going outside and “stoop-sitting.” Just remove the stoops from Philly’s brownstones and replace with cold marble steps.

She was just as certain about the key to longevity: “if you’re faithful you won’t come to want in old age.”
And she never did come to want. Ellen Hume would go on to celebrate her sapphire jubilee in 1915 and then her platinum jubilee in 1920. When she died in 1922, Ellen had been in the service of the Morris family a total of seventy-two years. Talk about staying power!

Ellen worked at three Morris houses: Cedar Grove, Pine Street, and Compton. She did her work by the light of oil candles in the early days, later by gas lamps, then electric light. She drew water from a well at first, later from a spigot; laid fires in each room early on, eventually she simply switched on the furnace. During her tenure with the Morrises, eighteen states entered the Union then the states went to war over slavery. The Reconstruction era came and went, so did the Gilded Age.

Ellen had done her fair share of traveling, but that was in childhood. She was born in Ireland in 1829 and soon after birth, she and her parents joined a group of Irish Protestants who immigrated to the Eastern Townships of Quebec, Canada to form a settler colony sponsored by the British government. Then a few years after the birth of their second daughter, Sarah Jane, something prompted her parents to move again—this time to Philadelphia. Her father never had the chance to establish a career—he died at age thirty-five and the young widow was left with two small children to support. Once they were of age, both girls were compelled to earn a living. Ellen entered service with the Edward C. Dale family at age seventeen then a few years later, she was hired by the Morris family.

There’s another reason Ellen’s story was newsworthy. Contrary to the notion that servants were not to be seen much less heard, this was one servant who had strong opinions and felt free to share them with others in the household. And the reporter made it clear that those “others” included John and Lydia Morris: “… her opinion on various matters has a great deal of weight with her employers.” Wonder if her employers ever had occasion to say to each other, “Ellen wouldn’t approve of that.”
The Second Head Gardener

Hot houses by Hitchings & Co. were a hot item among East Coast business leaders and amateur horticulturists in 1895. It was all about defying the seasons in order to grow exotic and delicate plants year-round. Greenhouses were flying off the shelves, complete with “portable” cast iron framing, a thousand feet of piping, and sloped glass panels. In the month of October alone, Hitchings had twenty-one greenhouses under construction. Vanderbilt was having one installed at Biltmore, Rockefeller at Sleepy Hollow, Hunnewell at Wellesley, Frelinghuysen at Whippany Farms.

Actually, John T. Morris beat them to it—his greenhouse had been installed at Compton the year before. True, it went up in flames three months later, but since it was covered by insurance, Hitchings rebuilt it immediately. Roses and succulents, palms and ferns were once again thriving under glass at Compton. Now all he needed was a gardener.

Who better to supervise Morris’s rebuilt Palm House than a hot house man, one with experience at more than one hot house, in more than one country. Enter John Conrad Ohnemuller. Originally from Baltimore, Ohnemuller had gardened at several places by age forty-two. He trained in Edinburgh, Scotland, and worked as a florist in Loughborough, England. Then, in 1893, he brought his English wife and child to California and took a florist position in downtown Los Angeles. His timing was right. Ornamental horticulture was taking off in LA and the forecast was sunny.
But just two years later, Ohnemuller traveled cross-country for the position as gardener to John T. Morris. After he and his family settled in a house on Allens Lane in 1895, Ohnemuller’s first task was planting the iris and peonies and maple trees Morris had ordered from Yokohama Nursery Company the previous winter.

One has to wonder if Ohnemuller’s real pride and joy were the exotics in the Palm House, like the vivid red flowering plantain that Joseph Meehan, brother of botanist/editor Thomas Meehan, came over to admire on a warm October afternoon in 1897: “Although long known to cultivators, it is rare to see in collections of to-day Musa coccinea, the scarlet flowered species, from Cochin China... It was a treat to see this plant nicely in flower in the conservatory of Mr. John T. Morris.”

Despite admiration for his handiwork, Ohnemuller moved back to Los Angeles the next year. Perhaps he longed for a hot house with the heavens for its roof. He had no position lined up, but placed a newspaper ad describing himself as a “competent, experienced landscape gardener, florist, horticulturist with best of references.” Morris began making arrangements for a new head gardener.

The Diarist

Some diaries are not worth reading—they’re tedious or inane, filled with the minutiae of lackluster lives. Louise Kellner’s diaries are otherwise. Chock full of round-the-world experiences told with wit and wonderment, these diaries were not for her eyes only, but for John and Lydia Morris’s eyes. They were meant to be coffee table chronicles for the Morrises to open in “after years” and savor again the world they had traveled. But in addition to diligently recording the whens and wheres (if this is Tuesday it must be Darjeeling), Louise wrote of things not found in the typical travel log. Tales of fellow passengers, shysters palming off fake antiquities, John’s forgetfulness, Lydia’s flirting.

Louise told of the siblings’ lost eyeglasses, lost receipts, over-eating, over-spending. All those cherry trees . . . knives . . . curiosities John was buying. And those gold and silver embroideries . . . tea cups . . . that leopard skin Lydia had to have, then had to delouse with arsenical soap. Louise knew, first-hand, what seeds, plants, trees, sculptures John and Lydia were buying for Compton. This brother-sister team was snapping up native specimens in India, Japan, China, Norway and no matter the country, the threesome would settle down in a sitting room at their hotel every few days and do some accounting.

Diarist, accountant, interpreter, go-between—not exactly what Louise went to school for in her hometown, Oldenburg, Germany. And not the career she came to the U.S. to pursue in 1876. Soon after settling into her brother’s home in Philadelphia, at the non-traditional age of thirty-eight, Louise enrolled in the Woman’s Hospital Training
School for Nurses. Her instructors were Anna Elizabeth Broomall, Professor of Obstetrics, William Williams Keen, Jr., pioneer brain surgeon, and Albert Holmes Smith, President of the Philadelphia Obstetrical Society and incidentally, fluent in German. Notwithstanding these renowned instructors, the graduates of this nursing school weren’t getting hired by public hospitals in Philadelphia. It was Louise’s good fortune to be hired by Hahnemann Hospital, where she later became Supervisor of Nurses, then Principal of the Training School for Nurses.

Exactly how Louise Kellner came to the attention of John and Lydia Morris as a potential travel assistant is not clear. How much they paid for her services is not clear either. What is clear—how Lydia Morris referred to Louise. When Lydia applied for a passport in 1889, she listed Louise as “my maid.” Perhaps she did this so Louise would not be in violation of naturalization requirements (Louise had just filed her declaration). Or perhaps Lydia actually regarded Louise as a maid.

But Louise regarded herself otherwise. Once she became a U.S. citizen in 1891 and began applying for her own passports, Louise made her occupation perfectly clear—“Professional Nurse.” That is, until her 1902 passport—for yet another trip with John and Lydia to faraway places—when she listed her occupation as “Lady.”

Louise Kellner (hat in hand) with Lydia and John Morris riding an elephant, 1889
The Third Head Gardener

Ada was her name—the baby born at Compton in 1899. Not to John T. Morris or his sister Lydia. Oh my no! To their gardener, Frank Gould, living in the carriage house adjacent to the Morris’s summer house. And did Lydia and John give the newborn gifts? Probably, although it would have been more like John to have a new chrysanthemum named for her—the Ada Compton Gould. Note Ada’s middle name. (For the record, there are no Comptons within 500 people on the Gould-MacLeod family tree.)

Ada was the gardener’s third child. His previous two were born at Wellesley, Massachusetts, where he supervised the H.H. Hunnewell orchid house for ten years. Where he became friends with Jackson Thornton Dawson, plant propagator at the Arnold Arboretum in nearby Boston. Where he later bartered with the arboretum’s director, Charles Sprague Sargent, for plantings for Compton’s expansive gardens.

Gould was John T. Morris’s third head gardener in six years. He was forty-four on arrival and remained at Compton for twenty-one years. During those years, he was a frequent prize winner at Philadelphia-area horticultural exhibitions and an occasional lecturer. But he excelled at show-and-tell. Depending on the season, he showed ageratum, Brussels sprouts, chrysanthemums, currants, honeysuckle, luffa, peonies, roses. In fact, there came a year when the horticulture society reported they were disappointed that Gould had not shown much, due to a schedule snafu.

Show-stopping, that’s what Gould aimed for. Like
back in 1879 when he was gardener to Viscount Galway at Serlby Hall in Nottinghamshire, England. When he manicured the grounds to within an inch of perfection for the wedding of the season—the Viscount’s. So where did Gould learn how to tend the pleasure grounds of a 4,000-acre estate? He probably started at his father’s side in Hersham, England. However, being trained by a village gardener would not have landed Gould the top position at a status estate of the realm. One clue comes from geography—Hersham is just eleven miles from Kew Gardens. Other clues are his technical knowledge, his leadership in the Chestnut Hill Horticultural Society, his friendships. It all adds up to his being an Old Kewite. Unfortunately, the Kew Archives doesn’t have student records going back to the 1870s, so we rely on an educated guess.

There are no descendants to ask. Neither Ada nor her three siblings had children. They were a close-knit family, living on Mermaid Lane during their father’s retirement years, marrying late in life. Gould’s house was recently up for sale and, from photos, it’s easy to see the hallmarks of a master gardener—stacked stone knee-walls, terraced plantings, well-chosen trees, and a proper gardener’s shed.

The Cook

I wonder if Nellie ever wore the white enamel brooch to church, the brooch Miss Morris bequeathed to her. The brooch shaped like a dogwood blossom or maybe a pansy with the diamond in the center. And did she ever take a vacation with the money Miss Morris left her, the $50-a-month annuity she received the rest of her life. Did Nellie ever wear the under-linen and stockings, the previously worn but gently treated personal items that Miss Morris willed to her four household servants. Her chambermaid, her lady’s maid, her waitress, and Nellie, her cook. I wonder if Nellie ever made “Apples a la Zuave” for one of Miss Morris’s social luncheons. The recipe Miss Morris scrawled on a card, copied word for word from *Christian Work: Illustrated Family Newspaper* in 1897. The hold-your-breath recipe that took way too much time and always threatened to collapse when taken from the oven. And why were there exactly twenty-four almonds in that apples-ooh-la-la. After all, they were finely chopped. Who’s to know if there were twenty-five or twenty-six? Well, Miss Morris would. And for that same reason, Nellie wouldn’t dare leave out the tablespoonful of black coffee.

I’ll bet it was the meringue that really gave Nellie agita—that’s not something she whipped up every day. Why not a hearty bread and butter pudding instead? What Miss Morris really needed were a few more Irish dishes for her cookbook, not this fluff stuff that Jetta, the waitress, had to run up to the table before it plopped. Enough already with Miss Morris traipsing down to the
kitchen, waving another highfalutin recipe in Nellie’s face. “Compote of Pineapple,” “Rice a la Imperatrice.” But Miss Morris was a fan of Sarah Rorer, Principal of the Philadelphia Cooking School, whose lectures on all things cookery were reported almost verbatim in the *Inquirer*. Wonder what Nellie thought about Rorer’s recipe for “Roulettes of Beef with Italian Potato Balls.”

Salt-of-the-earth Nellie Donahue—John and Johanna’s third child—born at Brookline, Massachusetts in 1871, when John was likely laboring in the granite quarry. Then brought to Whitemarsh Township at age three, when John took a job at the limestone quarry, unearthing faux-marble for tombstones and table tops. Around 1903, Nellie left her family home and moved in town to join three other servants to John T. Morris and his sister Lydia. Thus began the whirlwind life of a cook with two kitchens, the winter kitchen on Pine Street, the summer kitchen at Compton. Did Nellie know she’d be cooking for a pair of world travelers who would return from Norway, Egypt, China with fond memories of strange and curious foods? Turkish coffee, curried eggs, salted cod.

After Miss Morris died and Penn botany students started using the kitchen at Compton to cook uneatable things, Nellie returned to family and lived with her brother John on Wissahickon Avenue, less than a mile from Compton. Thomas, her older brother, was just up the road, gardening for someone in Abington and her sister Mary was close by in Philly. I wonder if Nellie ever invited them all to dinner. And did she set her table with the gold-rimmed Haviland china Miss Morris gave her. And serve something modern, like “Oysters a la Bechamel.” Or did she serve a hearty mutton stew.
I want to know who he is, the landscape architect named Y Muto, who travelled six thousand miles to work for John T. Morris at Compton. So little is known about him. But I see him in his work—the thoughtful arrangement of pagodas and stone slab bridge and bronze cranes of the Tsukiyama-niwa (Hill Garden) at Compton, the “way to paradise” arched footbridge of the Temple Gate Garden in Fairmount Park, the standing stones of spiritual meaning in the Overlook at Compton. These good-for-the-soul gardens, designed by Muto in the early 1900s, still reveal his handiwork. But I want to know more.

I want to know if this is the same Muto who created the Japanese garden for Alexander Tison, who had been Professor of American Law at the Imperial University in Tokyo. A perfectly composed Kaiyū-shiki-teien (Promenade Garden) at Grey Lodge in the Catskills where Tison spent summers. It could be that Tison arranged for Muto’s services through the New York office of the Yokohama Nursery Company. It could also be that this garden, whose elemental forms remain unchanged, was Muto’s first commission in the U.S.

I want to know if Muto’s workmanship inspired Kahlil Gibran when he vacationed at Grey Lodge a decade later. It had been a dreadful summer and Gibran was glad to escape the hustle-bustle of New York City. It could be that Gibran was recollecting Muto’s landscape when he wrote “Beyond the Throne of Beauty” some months later:

One heavy day I ran away from the grimy face of society and the dizzying clamour of the city and directed my weary step to the spacious valley. I pursued the beckoning course of the rivulet and musical sounds of the birds until I reached a lonely spot where the flowing branches of the trees prevented the sun from touching the earth. I stood there, and it was entertaining to my soul—my thirsty soul who had seen naught but the mirage of life instead of its sweetness.

I want to know if this is the same Muto who designed the Japanese garden for Major James Dooley of Richmond, Virginia in 1911. Maymont, the estate named for Dooley’s wife, sits atop a bluff on the boulder-strewn James River, where Muto’s artistic reimagining of the terrain is evident in a spirited cascade with an Azumaya (viewing pavilion) and stone steps alongside, Tōrō lanterns symbolically lighting the way.

I want to know if this is the same Muto who returned to the U.S. for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1914. Who choreographed gardens of quiet beauty for the Japan Pavilion—dwarfed trees and waterways, footbridges and stone pagodas. Or perhaps he exhibited methods of pomology, floriculture and arboriculture for the Yokohama Nursery Company under the great glass dome of the Palace of Horticulture.

I want to know if visitors to the Exposition, like Teddy Roosevelt and Thomas Edison and Charlie Chaplin, lingered at Muto’s display. And if Camille Saint-Saëns was so taken with Muto’s nature poem that he determined then and there to compose new music for Victor Hugo’s poem, “S’il est un charmant gazon.”
I have a hunch this is one and the same person, whose full name, according to the 1914 passenger manifest of the S.S. Aki Maru, was Yonehachi Muto. Who was born in 1861 in Toyko. Whose distinguishing mark was a small mole on his right cheek. Who had been in the U.S. before, from April 1899 to August 1913. Whose son was Sataro Muto of Nakamura-machi, Yokohama. And whose descendants are more than welcome to contact me.

Whether my hunch is right or wrong, there was once a Mr. Muto who traveled to the West and left his distinguishing marks on our landscape. We can see him in the work of his hands where lines are blurred between ancient worlds and the present.
The Consultant

If you ran a nursery business near Philadelphia in the early 1900s, you’d be pretty nervous whenever Frank Mott Bartram, Special Agent with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, came around. It was his job to go from nursery to nursery, examining trees and shrubs for pests and diseases like San Jose Scale, Black Knot and Yellows. If Bartram found evidence of contamination, he might have to order the immediate destruction of stock. Imagine the relief at nurseries like Thomas Meehan & Sons in Germantown and Hoopes, Brother & Thomas in West Chester when Bartram completed his inspection and declared their stock healthy, ready to sell to local orchards and gardens.

Frank Bartram’s course of study at Cornell University prepared him well for his job and for lecturing at meetings of horticultural societies around the state on timely topics. And his upbringing as a Quaker prepared him well for the many leadership positions he held through the years, including the Central Committee of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and the committees on Philanthropic Labor and First-Day Schools. A vocal leader among Philadelphia Friends, he gave lectures on difficult subjects, including prison reform, advancing Friends’ principles in other countries, and capital punishment. Frank Bartram knew how to deal with conflict, both professionally and religiously.

It’s no surprise, then, that John T. Morris hired a resolute and principled person like Bartram to assist with a project that could have volatile implications for Philadelphia because it was based on a precarious alliance of several city-wide cultural and educational institutions. Bartram was forty-two years old, now a free-lance horticulturist, when Morris hired him in 1914. And within weeks, Bartram was dispatched on a six-country European tour to examine the competition and return with ideas for how to do it better. In his typical eye-for-detail fashion, Bartram amassed a wealth of information, recorded in diaries during his year-long consultancy, periodically shared with Morris in meetings or letters.

But if you think this project was about enhancing the grounds of Compton, you’d be wrong. This was about a state-of-the-art botanical school for Philadelphia. Not even a worldwide war was enough to put this project on pause; only the untimely death of Morris in the summer of 1915 brought things to a halt. Bartram went on to establish a credible reputation as a landscape architect, designing a range of projects from small residential to large-scale institutional.

For thirty-three years Bartram served on the Kennett Square School Board. Midway through his tenure, the board established the Frank M. Bartram Prize in Science and for the next twenty years, a high school senior received the award during graduation. Bartram’s commitment to religious schooling was equally strong—as a member of the London Grove Friends Meeting he taught a First-Day class. Bartram and his sister Mary, unmarried siblings, lived together their entire lives (as did John and Lydia Morris). For a number of years, they hosted gatherings of the Young Friends Association in their home and never failed to promote Friends’ principles by word and deed.

Frank Bartram inherited “botanick fire” from his ancestor, John Bartram, the Father of American Botany;
he also inherited a few of his ancestor’s gardening tools. And each year, Frank and his sister were invited to attend the gathering of the John Bartram Association, as members of the extended Bartram family. But with so many horticulturally-inclined relatives capable of serving as Master of Ceremonies year to year, it took awhile for Frank to have the honor. His turn came in 1912. That was the year the association recognized Thomas Meehan for his efforts to save Bartram’s 102-acre garden—the garden that produced seed for Thomas Jefferson at Monticello—from total extinction. Imagine Bartram’s pride as he played emcee that day.

Frank Bartram, Master of Ceremonies, at the Bartram Association gathering

John Tonkin had been in Philadelphia four years when the United States joined its allies in “the war to end all wars.” As required, he went to the draft office in Chestnut Hill to register. But since he was a neutral alien, with two dependents, he was granted a deferral. So he returned to his job—as a gardener to Miss Lydia Morris of Compton—and continued his springtime chores, setting out cauliflower, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts in the vegetable gardens.

John Tonkin knew all about vegetable gardens—he learned on England’s Cornwall coast. By age fourteen, he was a gardener’s apprentice, preparing for a career as a “market gardener,” not merely tilling the soil in his own backyard. John’s birth in 1887 was registered at the civil parish of Madron, though his family lived several miles away in Tregavarah, a tiny hamlet off the St. Just Road. Today, a handful of two-story cottages built of coarse granite mark the place, but sadly, Tregavarah’s chapel is no longer standing. It was bombed during the Second World War and never rebuilt. John’s father, Thomas, raised cattle on grazing land enclosed by boundaries dating to medieval times. Being Cornish, John’s speech was likely filled with heavy “r’s” but few “h’s.”

Tregavarah is a “tre” or homestead at the southwestern tip of England, near Penzance, a lands-end region that supplied British cities with produce, fish, and beef. The region also exported its sons and daughters to other parts of the world, due to lack of employment opportunities. In fact, seven of Thomas Tonkin’s ten children immigrated to the U.S.
informal talks to visitors, hosted administrators from the university, and was—in every sense of the word—caretaker. Had Tonkin not taken care to rescue items from the main house as it was being demolished in 1968, we would not have ledgers and other primary sources that help us identify the people who worked for the Morrices at Compton.

John, with his newly wedded wife Margaret and his sister Clarice, sailed for Philadelphia in 1913 to join older brother Thomas, who had crossed seven years earlier. Thomas, also a gardener, worked for Thomas Meehan’s nurseries in Germantown and may have arranged for John to work there. Wherever John was employed initially, he didn’t stay long—his boss swore at him and he quit. John quickly located part-time employment at Compton, working under head gardener Frank Gould. Soon after, John joined the grounds staff full-time and remained at Compton the rest of his career.

When Gould left Compton in 1919, a new job description was drawn up for his replacement and although several candidates were interviewed, none of them was hired. In the end, Lydia Morris was “prevailed upon” to promote Tonkin to head gardener, perhaps in keeping with the bird-in-the-hand theory. The grounds staff was now in maintenance mode. With John T. Morrise’s death in 1915, no major projects were undertaken, except reconstruction of the Rose Garden, under Lydia’s direction. The original plantings of flowering cherries, chestnuts, and pines were falling prey to time and much of Tonkin’s work involved hewing out the dead and diseased, replanting certain species, and caring for the hearty. And, of course, maintaining the flower gardens to Miss Morris’s standard of perfection.

On January 25, 1932, the day after Lydia Morris died, Tonkin learned he was living in a new reality. His purchase order for five hundred spring chicks was cancelled and his budget cut to the bone. All activities at Compton “centering solely on Miss Morris’ personal pleasure and requirements” were to be discontinued, he was informed. Yet despite a severely downsized crew, Tonkin continued to care for the grounds after Compton became an arboretum under the aegis of the University of Pennsylvania. He gave
When did Mary’s heart start giving her problems? I would like to believe it never did, but unfortunately...

Maybe it started as she climbed the stairs one morning, carrying a bouquet of roses for Miss Morris’s dressing table. Or maybe when she was a child in Bundouglas, Galway, one of Martin Toole and Mary Lyden’s brood of...
eight. Maybe on the roiling seas en route to America at age twenty, bringing hopes and dreams of a better life and not much else. Or later, after she became Mrs. Francis Patrick Conway.

She never moved far from Compton after marriage, just up the road to Chestnut Hill, where Frank was a successful contractor. Her younger sister Jetta and newly-wedded husband Jim O’Neil—Miss Morris’s former waitress and chauffeur—didn’t move far away either. They were in Flourtown. Patrick and Ellen, two more siblings, were across the Schuylkill. Another—Katherine—was in Rhode Island, and occasionally the whole kit-n-caboodle would motor up to visit her. Tom, their baby brother, would have been nearby too, chauffeuring executives at Tastykake, except he went back to Ireland for three years right after he received a Certificate of Naturalization. When he returned to Philly, authorities ruled he had violated regulations by failing to establish permanent residence. So Tom expatriated himself, probably unintentionally.

Sometimes, Mary and Jetta, with spouses and siblings, picnicked over at Meadowbrook Lane. Near the towering gabled stone house that had been their home for many years. Where they once took care of a Quaker lady with modern sensibilities. And where, in the end, she took care of them.

The Secretary

It’s only after many years of loyal service that an employee receives a gold watch, like twenty, thirty years. So why did Miss Morris give William Russell a gold watch after only two years’ service as her secretary? And this was no ordinary watch from Wanamaker’s or Gimbel Brothers. This was her brother John’s own watch. The fourteen karat gold, minute-repeating pocket watch made in Geneva, Switzerland, by Haas Neveux & Cie that John himself bought for 1500 francs in 1895, when he and Lydia were touring Switzerland. The watch inscribed with his name and the year. The watch inscribed a second time by Miss Morris years later. And the words she chose make it all the more mysterious:

1919
William H. Russell
from
Lydia T. Morris
“Thank you”

Very cryptic of Miss Morris. We’re left wondering what William did to deserve such a treasured belonging. Did he arrange to have the Pierce Arrow limousine repaired after that accident in Philly. Or cajole the Chestnut Hill Police Department into assigning officers to patrol Compton after the burglar alarm started malfunctioning. Or negotiate with contractors for all those repairs at the Pine Street townhouse.

More likely it was handling the aftermath of John T. Morris’s unexpected death while vacationing in New
Hampshire. There was much to handle afterwards and it likely began when Miss Morris asked William to begin pulling together all of Mr. Morris’s Byzantine coins, Roman glass, Japanese armor, Alaskan amulets, Chinese lacquers, books, maps, swords, knives. So here was William Russell, an immigrant from Scotland with his reliable Kilmarnock brogue, surrounded by ancient curiosities. It would have taken months for him to inventory hundreds of items which, according to Mr. Morris’s will, were not to leave the premises unless a museum wanted to borrow something. All except Mr. Morris’s own watch, which Miss Morris, out of gratitude and sorrow, gave to William.

Certainly, William was well-qualified for an inventory job this immense. Prior to joining Miss Morris’s staff, he had served twenty-one years in the Office of the Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury Department in Washington, D.C. Yes, there once was an architectural division within the Treasury, tasked with determining the need for federal buildings and getting them built, not only in the District of Columbia, but across the country. So staff like William created inventories, draftsmen drafted plans, contractors received contracts and voila, towns like Camden, South Carolina and Evanston, Wyoming got new post offices, Philadelphia got a new mint.

Actually, William was over-qualified for the position of Secretary to Miss Morris—he held a law degree from George Washington University. Yet here he was, William Henry Dunlop Russell, L.L.B., approving invoices for everything from azalea pots to dairy pails to screwdrivers to a new 1927 Pierce Arrow limo in standard green with optional heater and bracket headlamps.
Mr. Morris’s watch was not the only thing Miss Morris gave William. Under the terms of her will, he received a $5,000 legacy and college education for his sons. She also ensured his future employment by declaring him Secretary to the Morris Foundation, the position he held the rest of his life.

And during those years, William heard things at meetings of the Board of Managers, things that must have made him hold his tongue at times. But he didn’t hold his tongue when it came to the whereabouts of important Morris family papers. He had them. Letters, bills, deeds, bank books, business correspondence. Dating to the 1700s. Enough material for a book. And he would be happy to make everything available to the foundation, he informed them shortly after Miss Morris’s death.

Evidently the managers weren’t interested, but William’s son certainly was. As a matter of fact, William Russell Jr. was most interested and began researching the papers salvaged by his father—ten linear feet of papers—for a book on the business history of the Morris family and their associates. But that was the year William Russell Jr. was elected to the faculty of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. His scholarly interests shifted and the book was never written.

In 1964, William Russell Jr. donated the Morris family papers to the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware. The book is still waiting to be written.

The Attorney

Someone taught Maurice Bower Saul tenacity—the stick-to-itiveness to remind the Morris Foundation Board, time and again, that Lydia T. Morris never wanted the Compton mansion saved; she wanted it torn down and a memorial erected in its place. Someone taught Saul the importance of goodwill—the generous spirit (and whimsy) to request a single red rose in lieu of rent for one of his properties. Someone taught him fair work ethics—the evenhandedness to defend clients whether rich or poor, famous or unheard-of.

The someone who instilled these qualities in Maurice Saul was John Graver Johnson, Esq. There was no Philadelphia attorney more knowledgeable, more successful (colleagues quipped he won cases just by showing up in court), or more unassuming (he declined two nominations to the U.S. Supreme Court) than Johnson. In fact, Johnson’s record for number of cases argued in the U.S. Supreme Court and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court still stands. By the time Saul became Lydia Morris’s personal attorney, Johnson had schooled him well, starting back in 1905 when Saul graduated from Penn Law School and Johnson invited him to become an associate.

The thread of legacy between mentor and protégé was strong and enduring. Like Johnson, Saul represented an astonishing number of corporations and individuals. And like Johnson, he kept an eagle eye on all of the firm’s cases, earning him the title “The Boss.” The legacy was tangible as well. Saul inherited his mentor’s desk and inkwell and paper weight—emblems of the law office where Johnson had worked twelve-hour days for individuals like J. P. Morgan,

When Johnson died, his associates—including Saul—took over the law practice. But Saul quickly earned the reputation and the clientele necessary to establish a new law firm in Philadelphia: Saul, Ewing, Remick & Saul. That same year, Saul and his wife Adele bought Rose Valley Farm, fifteen miles west of his offices in the Land Title Building. From then on, Saul invested much time and effort in improving the farm and the valley along Ridley Creek. He extended his services to his neighbors by filing incorporation papers for the Borough of Rose Valley and served as its President for many years.

Midway through his career, Saul was elected a Trustee of the University of Pennsylvania and within one month of his election, he had arranged nothing short of a coup for his alma mater. It was July of 1931. As usual, Saul had gone to his lodge on Long Lake in the Adirondacks. And as usual, Lydia Morris was at her favorite summer resort in Lake Placid. Saul interrupted his vacation to motor over to Lake Placid and meet with Miss Morris to find out whether she had decided, once and for all, to bequeath her property to his alma mater. There had been rumors she was leaning toward giving everything to Penn State and Penn's senior administrators were concerned that the Morris estate might slip through their fingers. But Saul argued the case successfully and assisted Miss Morris in revising the terms of her will, thus ensuring that Compton and Bloomfield would come under the custodianship of the University of Pennsylvania.

Lydia Morris died the following year and Saul continued on as Counsel to the Advisory Board of the Morris Foundation. Four years later, he won the appeal for exemption from inheritance taxes on Compton and Bloomfield, arguing that Miss Morris intended for the properties to be used as a public arboretum. But there was one argument he never won on her behalf: the Board declined to tear down the Compton mansion and it stood, the sad victim of misuse and neglect, until 1968.
The Doctor

In a Saturday evening early in the winter of 1932, a newspaper columnist happened to see Miss Lydia Morris at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. Usually she appeared hearty and hale—“masterful” the columnist described her—but that evening Lydia looked very ill. During intermission, Lydia told the columnist about arrangements she had made to secure the future of Compton, but then cautioned the columnist not to write or talk about it. Lydia died three weeks later and the columnist told all the following week in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*.

Lydia’s doctor at the time was John Francis McCloskey, a University of Pennsylvania medical school graduate of 1901, who, shortly after graduation, co-founded the Chestnut Hill Hospital. Fifteen years into his tenure at the hospital, he went to France during the war; in fact he was deployed three times, serving first as an ambulance driver, then surgeon at evacuation hospitals. He, too, could be called “masterful.” In fact, masterful may not be strong enough to describe a surgeon who gained a reputation for tackling dicey surgeries, including surgery on his brother “Dr. Edward,” also on staff at the hospital. When McCloskey made the newspapers, he was often described as, “a World War veteran and former All-American football star at Penn.”

After mustering out in 1919, McCloskey returned to Chestnut Hill and resumed treating his ever-increasing patient roster. By 1929, he was well aware of Lydia Morris’s failing health. But because Lydia was reluctant to speak of such things to anyone, it’s doubtful “Dr. John” was called to Compton unless she took a serious turn for the worse.

The good doctor was not only interested in her health—he was interested in what would become of her estate, the combined acreage of Compton and Bloomfield farm. Insiders claimed she planned to leave it (with substantial endowment) to the Philadelphia Museum of Art; others thought she had changed her mind and was negotiating with Penn State.

The summer prior to her death, Dr. McCloskey and Maurice Saul, Lydia’s attorney, motored up to Lake Placid, where Lydia was roughing it like a millionaire. They went at the urging of the President of their alma mater, who had taken a personal interest in expanding the university’s botany program and establishing a new landscape design program. All were well aware that the Morris estate would be invaluable and perpetually useful.
since the university was in serious need of space for field work. Lydia, McCloskey and Saul found a quiet spot at the Whiteface Inn and spent a couple of days hashing out changes to her will, thus ensuring that the estate would be in the capable hands of—not the art museum or the public university halfway across the state, but the private university in the city—the University of Pennsylvania. When word reached President Thomas S. Gates, he expressed his gratitude to the two alumni for their great helpfulness. It had taken six years, but was well worth the effort.

After Lydia’s death in January of 1932, McCloskey was named to the Advisory Board of Managers of the newly organized Morris Foundation, charged with administering the new arboretum. Also named were Maurice Saul and Lydia’s banker. These three who had attended to Lydia’s health, wealth and legal matters were now attending to her property.

In 1951, with fifty years’ service at Chestnut Hill Hospital to his credit, McCloskey was feted at a reception and dinner. That event would prove to be the final tribute paid him by the medical community. Two days later, he died at his home on Germantown Avenue. But the city paid him a tribute as well—they built a new school on Pickering Street and named it for him—the John F. McCloskey Public School. Pretty soon, they were calling it the Dr. John School.

### The Vacation Companion

When two society ladies from Philadelphia spend the season at Lake Placid during the 1920s, exactly how do they spend it? And what if one lady is in her fifties and the other in her seventies? Knowing the older lady’s inclination to motor through the gardens of her summer place rather than stroll around, they probably don’t hike up Cascade Mountain or go swimming in the 65-degree lake. And what if these two ladies are not related, do not hold similar religious views and have only known each other a few years?

The younger lady was reared in an Episcopalian church whose Rector was a proponent of Christian socialism; the older was Quaker. Friendship would appear to be unlikely. But they were close enough to go on vacation together—several years running—at the lakeside resort famed for its “desirable social environment,” the Whiteface Inn.

By now you’ve surmised the older lady was Lydia Thompson Morris of Compton. And the younger? Bessie was her nickname, Elizabeth Herbert Stark her maiden name and Mrs. William Pierre Robert her formal name. Bessie married Captain Robert in Brookline, Massachusetts in 1902 and sailed right after the wedding reception for the Philippines—not exactly an ideal honeymoon spot. But the up-and-coming Captain—who by the way, graduated first in his class at the United States Naval Academy—had just received orders to take charge of ship repair at the Cavite Naval Station. When Robert’s tour of duty ended, orders took the couple to New Jersey, on to New Hampshire, Maine, Washington, DC, Virginia, then to the Philadelphia
Bessie at the clubhouse on Walnut Street in 1921, and at afternoon tea at the Colonial Dames house on Latimer Street.

By the mid '20s, the Acorn Club had become a popular location for luncheons and dinner-dances, especially during debutante season in December. One such luncheon was given in 1927 in honor of Bessie’s daughter, Elizabeth Stark Robert, a student at Smith College, hosted by Mrs. Edward Stalker Sayres. Two weeks later, Elizabeth was the guest of honor at a dinner at the Bellevue-Stratford given by Mr. and Mrs. Francis Reeve Strawbridge. To top off Elizabeth’s debut, Lydia threw a dinner-dance for her right after Christmas.

Exactly what year Lydia and Bessie began going to Lake Placid together is unclear; but in 1926 their arrival made the local newspaper. That was the year the innkeeper hired a new orchestra and a new French chef. The inn's weekly schedule provided Lydia and Bessie plenty of options for spending their time—Saturday evening treasure hunt, Sunday afternoon concert, formal tea every afternoon. If they played bridge, they could join the Monday night bridge club. Then there were cruises around the lake, occasional masquerade balls in the Wigwam, jaunts to the Kismet Shop for gifts imported from Turkey, Persia, Egypt and Kashmir (I bet Lydia couldn’t resist shopping there, given her penchant for imported goods).

And during free time, they probably read a lot—I’m guessing the latest historical novels like *Mistress Nell Gwynne*. Or maybe they took a break from all things historical and binge-read Agatha Christie mysteries. On rainy afternoons, they could take in a movie at the Palace Theatre—“The Little Snob” with Vitaphone sound or

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Whiteface Inn, circa 1920s

Navy Yard in 1920.

And immediately upon arrival, Bessie was accepted into Philadelphia society, thanks to some impressive connections. Perhaps not to any lady of social standing *per se*, but to families who could trace their lineage to colonial days—and that was a connection dear to Lydia’s heart. They were both members of the Society of the Colonial Dames of America. In fact, Lydia was a co-founder of the Pennsylvania society and had signed the charter in 1891, she being a seventh generation descendant of Anthony Morris of Philadelphia. Bessie traced her family line to Dr. Richard Starke of the Virginia colony.

And from that colonial kinship, other connections could be made; in particular, connections to the Acorn Club, the first women-only club in the United States. And a friendship could be built at events like the luncheon for
“Stage Struck” starring Gloria Swanson in two-color Technicolor.

In 1929, Bessie’s daughter, Elizabeth, joined them for a week or two and then she headed to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. I’d bet a dozen tea cakes that Lydia hosted a bon voyage party in the inn’s tea room for Elizabeth before she sailed.

The following year, Bessie’s husband was ordered back to Washington, D.C. and Lydia went to Whiteface Inn without a companion. At the end of her six-week stay, Lydia was honored at a musicales with solos by guest artists and selections by the orchestra.

Then in 1931, as a two-year economic downturn worsened and international relations degenerated, Lydia managed to return to Lake Placid. But work undoubtedly kept Captain and Mrs. Robert close to D.C. as he began to modernize the nation’s naval fleet, in case war came.

When John Thompson Morris of Philadelphia turned forty-four, he took early retirement from the presidency of his father’s Iron Works to pursue other interests. Morris, unlike his father and uncles, preferred the role of benefactor, one who reaches into the past and buys up rare objects, then donates them for public edification. While still in his thirties, Morris took on this role by embarking on three significant tasks: amass an impressive quantity of objects of antiquity from around the world, create the most excellent pleasure gardens in Philadelphia, and serve—with tenacity and candor—on boards of civic organizations. After retiring in 1891, he was able to give unlimited time to these interests. Morris was no different from other benefactors of the Gilded Age. They too set for themselves similar tasks, those prosperous, ambitious Philadelphians with famous surnames—Pennypacker, Stotesbury, Wanamaker and Wharton.

When it came time to draft his will in 1909, Morris was fully aware that much depended on him—he was the last male in his immediate family. All his life, Morris had been a good steward and it was up to him to ensure the future of many things. Through trust funds, Morris provided a gracious plenty for his household servants, for charitable organizations, like the Philadelphia Home...
for Incurables, and for cousins (he being unmarried, his siblings being without heirs). After taking care of all these, he bequeathed his family’s ancestral home, Cedar Grove, which he considered a colonial treasure, to the Society of Colonial Dames of America.

But Morris’s will makes it clear that he had one more task in mind, an ambitious task that required all of his residuary estate and depended on close cooperation of several organizations. He wanted to start a school.

In a 12-page treatise in the middle of his will, Morris designed his school and its two supporting auxiliaries. He named it “The Morris Botanical Garden, School and Museum.” And, in typical founder-itis fashion, Morris didn’t leave any aspect to the notions of others. He outlined the major goals and defined the complex administrative and fiduciary relationship between the garden, the school and the museum. He specified a corporate-type Board of Managers, to be composed of representatives from three institutions, Haverford College, The Academy of National Sciences of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania. He then launched into the curriculum, a program to suit the hybrid institution he envisioned—a trade school with a scientific foundation.

Morris set parameters for entering students (16 years of age, proficient in basic school subjects, male, possibly some females), for methods of instruction he deemed most appropriate, housing, and rules of decorum. He went so far as to state how students should spend their weekends, adamantly that they attend church on Sundays. As for tuition—it was free. Room and board—free. Clothing—free. Students only needed to render service on the grounds while attending school. Plus they would receive a $100 honorarium at the end of their four-year course of study to help them launch their career.

This school/garden/museum was no pipe dream. In fact, a few years later, Morris plucked his dream out of his will and decided to carry it out during his lifetime. He had done this before, when he jumped ahead of his will by commissioning the Morris Infirmary for Haverford College, and afterwards changed his will, canceling the bequest. He sensed a pent-up demand—there were so many country estates in the region and so few practical gardeners.

All Morris needed was the perfect property for situating his school. And he found it within waving distance of Compton, his country home in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood of Philadelphia. Morris purchased Bloomfield Farm in 1914 for just this purpose. Located on the Wissahickon Creek across the road from his estate, Bloomfield came with a couple of houses, a mill and history traceable to the 1740s.

With property in hand, the dream could be turned into bricks and mortar. Morris did his homework, coached by a consultant who traveled anywhere there was a training program attached to renown gardens—England, Scotland, Germany, Holland. A highly qualified consultant whose surname was Bartram (as in descendent of John Bartram, Father of American botany). Frank Bartram’s task was to scope out what other gardening schools were doing and return to Philadelphia with a plan for something even better; something that grafted the practical onto the academic.
Morris most certainly took to heart the words of President James A. Garfield, promoter of all things agricultural, whose memorial monument had been unveiled in Morris's beloved Fairmount Park a dozen years earlier, "At the head of all sciences and arts, at the head of civilization and progress, stands—not militarism, the science that kills, not commerce, the art that accumulates wealth—but agriculture, the mother of all industry, and the maintainer of human life." But to Morris, although farming may be necessary, it was not the raison d'être of his school.

It mattered a lot to Morris that a horticulturist was proficient in plowing and cultivating. And that a greenhouse manager knew about plumbing and steamfitting. And that a gardener understood accounting procedures. It all mattered to Morris because his goal was to produce "competent and useful gardeners" who gained most of their experience outdoors, not in classrooms, and whose credential was a diploma, not a degree. He believed he was onto something very few were doing except at a handful of U.S. schools and at botanic gardens on the Continent, like Edinburgh, Glasnevin, Frederiksoord and Kew Royal Botanic Gardens (the ne plus ultra of the day).

A call for practical training had grown out of the 1889 national convention of florists, landscapers and horticulturists. It was a vociferous call that named names and laid blame: “Let us have a great horticultural training school, where the professors are not afraid to stain their fingers in laboratory and garden nor ashamed to don a blue apron and lead a class with skilled fingers in any line of practical work . . . one such school, well endowed and properly manned will do more for American horticulture than all our agricultural schools will ever do . . . to correct much that is now erroneous and ridiculous.” It was time to end the “great farce” of teaching horticulture without getting dirt under the fingernails.

In all likelihood, Morris paid close attention to this dispute. And when it came time to plan his own school, he could probably name all the practical work schools on the East Coast. But as with all Morris’s prior projects, he was aiming for the very best—a distinctive school with its roots firmly in the past and its hope in a new profession of practical gardening.

Now that he had a charter and a location, Morris turned to physical facilities. He favored the functionality of the I-shaped Pennsylvania Hospital. Could something smaller be designed for the north corner of Bloomfield Farm, leaving the center open for greenhouses and fields, he asked Bartram? Regardless of architecture, he knew exactly how the school should operate—just as it had during his school days at Haverford College. He informed Bartram of this, more than once.

In early July, 1915, Morris told Bartram to start on the next project—designs for practice greenhouses with plenty of space for plant propagation. Together, they reviewed sketches and Bartram took notes as Morris approved this, nixed that. Though news of the war in Europe was taking up more and more space in Gardeners’ Chronicle from London, Bartram drew Morris’s attention to reports of a new professional diploma in horticulture. Could this program be refashioned for Philadelphia? How quickly could they get the course of study designed and the first class enrolled? Several well-
respected horticulturalists had already offered to leave their positions and come to Philadelphia. Morris debated whether to go ahead and engage them.

The U.S. Commissioner of Education was ready with names for the Board of Managers; an official with the U.S. Department of Agriculture was scouting potential faculty. Morris told Bartram he was willing to open the program with a small group of day students, even before buildings were constructed. Yet despite the approval of virtually all the leading agencies and institutions akin to the project, Morris reversed his decision: “Mr. Morris feels the school cannot open before 1916,” Bartram noted in February of 1915. Apparently, Morris felt a school wasn’t a school without dormitories and classrooms.

In August, John Morris and his sister Lydia vacationed at their usual place—the Mount Washington Hotel in New Hampshire. And Morris continued working on a myriad of design details, sending Bartram sketches and comments on student accommodations, dining hall, lecture hall, labs. On August 10th, Morris had a better idea about fixtures for the dormitory bathrooms, so he wrote another “long epistle” jammed with his latest thoughts on the administration building, auditorium, seed collection room and dormitory bathrooms. And why, he queried Bartram, hadn’t he received a response to his previous letter about the bath sinks. Time was marching on. He had a lot to attend to—permissions, contracts. “I am ready to go ahead at once if data is presented to me for consideration,” he wrote. That was Morris’s final letter. He died of acute kidney failure August 15, 1915.

Morris’s determination to start a school did not die with him. Lydia Thompson Morris picked up where her brother left off by commissioning Edgar V. Seeler to design the educational buildings and greenhouses at Bloomfield, and to draft a plan for converting the Compton mansion into a museum. Seeler began work with a trip to Boston to meet Arnold Arboretum staff, who provided positive feedback—the location was ideal, the demand for gardeners was high, the time was right.

Many in the world of horticulture were eager to see what would become of this “interesting proposition” of a school: “Its development will be watched with peculiar interest by all in the horticultural and floricultural business,” proclaimed the editor of The Florists’ Exchange. But as harvest season came and went, there was no further word of progress on John Morris’s vision. No press releases, no interviews, no small-scale models.

Frank Bartram finished up his journals and turned them over to Miss Morris’s staff. Then in the spring of 1917, as young men began leaving farms to enlist in the military, Bartram took on the resulting farmer shortage by joining a regional committee. The following spring, Edgar Seeler submitted drawings of Bloomfield buildings and Compton renovations then he, too, turned to war-related tasks. His next commission was to create a new community of 500 homes in Ridley Park to alleviate the housing shortage near war-related industries.

Miss Morris had her own tasks to attend to. Once the U.S. entered the war, she gave liberally of her time and money to the social welfare of thousands of sailors and marines stationed at the Navy Yard.
or these necessary and laudable reasons, the Morris Botanical Garden, School and Museum, as envisioned in the pages of a will, remained a vision . . . until 1929. That was the year Miss Morris updated her will and by then much had changed, economically, culturally and institutionally. Several attempts had been made in the early 1920s to establish cooperative gardener education programs, including the Massachusetts Agricultural College’s arrangement with the National Association of Gardeners. But the American system of gardener education has always leaned toward the scientific and theoretical. And most practical work programs did not survive long.

In 1929, when Lydia Morris was faced with how best to carry out her brother’s vision, she understood that his approach to gardener education was not in keeping with current trends. At the dawn of the 1930s, it was more important to conduct botanical research and disseminate that knowledge to the world than to prepare head gardeners for country estates; to offer advanced courses for students whose preliminary education was done elsewhere; to build offices and research labs rather than dormitories. And thus, under these terms as specified in Lydia Morris’s will, Compton and Bloomfield, hereafter known as The Morris Arboretum, became the responsibility of the Botanical Department of the University of Pennsylvania.
No Ordinary Property

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Music to read by: “You Must Believe in Spring”
Fred Hersch with Toots Thielemans

Lion-like force of nature, champing to move the museum’s treasures into the new Parthenon-esque building on the Schuylkill River and better yet, acquire more objects for its vast spaces. It was the tail-end of the Roaring Twenties and he was prowling for pieces of history in places like Italy, France, Belgium, Persia.

The woman—Lydia Thompson Morris—world-rambling doyenne of Pine Street in winters, Chestnut Hill in summers. Owner of a thousand curios bought on grand tours with her brother John. A restive lady who could rightfully claim, been there, done that.

Collecting was her industry, the by-product of her father’s industries in brewing and ironmongery. To many avid collectors in those days, curios were not merely things of beauty, they served a larger purpose. The same might be
When the stock market crashed. As the nation plunged into the Great Depression, a different sort of crash was about to occur, and the epicenter was Lydia’s summer place, Compton.


Fiske, who had co-authored a tome on the history of architecture, could very well think it a monstrosity. And being an outspoken academic, he wouldn’t have any problem calling Compton pseudo-classical, a sham, mimicry. How ironic—John and Lydia’s world class collection of objet-d’art, housed in a conspicuous edifice.

Though her health was failing (one acquaintance said she looked quite ill), Lydia still took interest in her groves and gardens at Compton, with daily excursions...
around the grounds in her chauffeur-driven roadster. She probably turned up the thermostat. Instructed her attorney to keep all employees on the payroll despite the dreadful unemployment situation. Contacted Fiske. Motored to the museum in the Pierce Arrow, with two young women in tow.

Lydia had a reputation for holding fast to commitments and opinions and belongings. Then, periodically, she donated some of her belongings. So far, she had donated more than twenty-five thousand dollars worth, enough to earn her a place on the short list of museum devotees. She was eighty; it was time to donate something else to Fiske. Something far larger than previous belongings.

Lydia might be frail but she was known to be frank, so she wouldn’t have wasted time introducing the topic: She and her brother had always intended to establish a school of botanical arts at Compton. The best way to make it happen was to give the estate—lock, stock, and manicured grounds—to Fiske’s museum.

Imagine Lydia launching into well-thought-out details. The museum had a school of industrial art; a school of botanical arts would be a fitting complement. She would set up a foundation, bring in advisors—the Olmsted brothers, Professor Pond from Harvard (where Fiske took two degrees). It would be a branch of the Pennsylvania Museum with botanical gardens tended by students and their instructors.

Imagine what Fiske was thinking: Her most unfortunate house. Her most peculiar acquisitions. Her most curious gardens. What could the museum possibly do with a collection of thirty-five hundred living things?

And picture Lydia persuading Fiske that Compton was no ordinary property but a spiritual place full of wonders, where people could linger and recall pleasant times. And was she recalling her collecting days, when she bought silk embroideries in India and jewelry in Norway and pottery in Italy? When she had a “mesmeric effect” on gentlemen aboard ship and they wrote her poetry and gave her flowers?

Value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. And although Fiske was well shy of the fifteen million dollar endowment he initiated the year before, and had more museum space than he could fill, Compton must have held no value in his eyes. An estate to which she would attach more strings than King David’s harp.

But someone else saw the value—Thomas S. Gates, President of the University of Pennsylvania. Gates had been courting Lydia earnestly, with letters and phone calls and visits, maybe even gifts. So in the end, she bequeathed the estate to her suitor.
Two academic departments—Botany and Landscaping—proposed their own interpretation of Lydia’s plans. Botany won. They purchased truckloads of expensive equipment and moved into the unfortunate house. The Chair of the Botany department, who took charge, stated that the house wasn’t seriously displeasing because it was screened by trees.

Out went centuries-old furnishings. In came desks and lab equipment. Genetics, climatic conditions, disease. It was all about plant science. And science can make such a mess of things.

So much for mowing and weeding and deadheading, those labor-intensive tasks that used to swell the seasonal staff to twenty to maintain picture-perfect gardens “fragrant with bloom, rich in color, graceful in simplicity.” The union of estate and university was celebrated the following spring with hundreds of people milling about the grounds.
Fiske may have let Compton slip through his fingers, but he was not left empty-handed. According to newspaper reports, Lydia’s bequest to the museum—some old family silver and antique furniture—was valued at seventy-five hundred dollars. Precious little from an estate reportedly worth four million dollars.

There’s another kicker to this story. Lydia stipulated that the Compton mansion be demolished after her death. No renovation, no expansion. Tear it down and erect a pavilion on the site, she informed her attorney in a separate letter. How unlike Lydia to forsake something entrusted to her care. But nothing short of taking it down would satisfy her. Perhaps the house lacked honesty, restraint, usefulness—those inherited traits of her family.

Lydia did not get her wish. Thirty-six years later her attorney was still appealing to the Advisory Board to demolish the place. The University of Pennsylvania wished it otherwise. They needed the mansion for faculty offices, lecture rooms, library, laboratories.

Deferred maintenance is a game people play with buildings. A game of great injustice to a place that has provided shelter and auspice. The basement turns moldy, the boiler explodes, electricity shorts out. Patch this, mend that, but after awhile, there are only two moves left: renovate it or demolish it. In 1968, after years of ill-treatment, Compton came to a violent end through the force of a blunt instrument.

Except for adornments deemed worthy of saving, the remains were dumped in a landfill across the Delaware River. Leaded glass, glazed brick, pilasters, gargoyle. Laid to rest at the homestead of James Whitall, who, curiously, was a long-departed relative of Lydia’s. The benediction pronounced by James’ wife, Ann Cooper Whitall, a devout Friend, in her diary two hundred years prior:

_O our time our precious time & we must leave it all ... What are we so eger afer the world for._

To dust returned a house of no antiquity nor any heir.

And what if Fiske had accepted Lydia’s offer? It would have been a major coup and the Compton mansion might still be standing, haughty and conspicuous, on one of the highest hills in Philadelphia, showplace for John and
Jetta – A Love Story of Compton

This story of Lydia Morris’s waitress and chauffeur is based on truth but told as fiction.
It was published in *The Copperfield Review* in 2016

Music to read by: “Spring Charm” by Adrian von Ziegler

She is walking down the stairs sideways so she can keep an eye on Miss Morris, teetering a step behind. “Let me take your arm,” she says to Miss Morris. Every day she says this and every day Miss Morris protests, “You’ll only hold up the parade.” But the old lady is the one who holds up the parade to look out the window. “Who’s that down there in the rose garden?”

The rose garden used to be an ordinary cutting garden. Then, right before their world tour—forty years ago now—Mr. and Miss Morris told the gardeners to dig the whole thing up. They wanted a garden that would inspire awe. A rosarium. Boxwood hedges encasing beds of fragrant teas. Paths that converged at a tall urn raised high on a pedestal. A room to bewitch lovers of nature and lovers of love.

She is waiting for Miss Morris to descend another step. They both know it’s the gardener, spraying the roses to keep black spot from marring perfect blooms. Will he cut off the thorns before he brings them in or make her do it? The mistress dislikes pricked fingers. Not that she minds de-thorning roses. This is what she has chosen. For so many reasons. How many girls from Ireland secure a position

Lydia’s small wonders of the world.

But would there be a Morris Arboretum?
Quakers have a relatively flat hierarchy, socially and ecclesiastically. They call themselves a Society of Friends, without need of priesthood or lords and ladies. Lest you think all is egalitarian among Friends, consider the Anthony Morris family of Philadelphia. Eighteenth century brewers, nineteenth century manufacturers in iron, twentieth century collectors of artifacts and relics. A first-among-equals Quaker family. Two of their descendants, a brother and sister, have decided to share their extraordinary collection with the public upon their deaths. And now, one of the two is gone. Miss Morris is eighty-one, fond of the 1880s, and nearly friendless. Consider the odds of Miss Morris living beyond the present decade.

She was terrified when she arrived in Philadelphia. Far, far from Galway, the second of her family to come over. What made her think she would favor the big city? Buildings so immense, trolleys swarming every which way, too much in Philadelphia on arrival? Especially in an important household like the Morris’s. How many employers reward employees handsomely the longer they serve? How often do two sisters get to work alongside each other these days?

But it’s not her sister she wants to be alongside these days. It’s James Joseph O’Neil. He is the real reason she chooses to continue in the Morris household, though she’s never told him anything of the sort. Such a courteous man, is what she thought years ago when he would drive up to the townhouse, doff his cap, and help Mr. and Miss Morris into the touring car. Then he would turn to her standing on the threshold and he would doff his cap again. To her. And she would curtsy and go back inside. Twenty years of doffing and curtsying. They are both so scrupulous, so self-respecting.

“Souvenir d’un Ami. Those were the roses he gave me in London,” Miss Morris mouths to the garden. She nods her woolly white head and creeps down another step. She, too, is so scrupulous, so self-respecting. Which is why there’s no use grabbing Miss Morris’s arm, though the risk of her falling down this massive staircase is great, God forbid. And thus they continue their treacherous journey to the dining room, where the table is set for one and chicken à la king is getting cold in the gilt Haviland serving bowl.

I regret having to say this: although it is 1930, Miss Morris still refers to her house employees as servants. Perhaps Miss Morris would like to be called, “Your Ladyship.”
pavement, the rudeness, the puzzling accents. And this Quaker family—what a renegade religion they followed. No priests? Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

The brother who is gone now, God rest his soul, was a little peculiar, with his curiosities set all about. Swords and helmets, piles of coins, medallions, seeds, photographs, journals, papers. Never has she seen so much to read in a private home. And a pair of spectacles in every room, so forgetful he was. Had the tics and foibles of a person who wants to know everything in precise detail and once he knows, will tell all in precise detail. Curiosities bought with money not easily parted with. Money a Bountiful Providence has graciously provided, Mr. Morris would say.

She came to America in search of security. With loyalty imprinted deep in her soul. And she has agreed to render her services until no longer needed. Now only the mistress of the house remains. See the mistress there, in tasseled shawl, being meticulous about something, probably a belonging of an ancestor. “It must be done right. Let me show you. Gently back and forth, never across the grain.” She is secure in this household, bound by a day to day, season by season schedule. Cook, waitress, chambermaid, lady’s maid, and mistress. A band of pilgrims traveling back and forth across the years.

Every Ides of March, they break up the townhouse on Pine Street. Cover priceless antiques in cotton sheets, place jewelry in velvet pouches, pack silk undergarments in tissue. And they are off to live in heaven at the end of Meadowbrook Lane, where splendor is a tonic for their souls.

She is thirsting for that tonic when they arrive each spring, when Mr. O’Neil opens the car door and offers his hand to Miss Morris. “Welcome home,” he says, and the words are a promise. He comes round and silently takes her hand. Behold him close to her, sturdy and ruddy in his proper suit, clear eyes regarding her. She steps out and there behind him, framed by clouds, is Compton, looking for all the world like her beloved Kylemore Castle. An otherworldly place where chores are not drudgery, where she is weightless. Where she can take off her apron during free hours and amble down the hillside and her hairpins will fall out.

It is here, surrounded by the aroma of roses under a milky moon that he will want to ask her to marry him. Every June he wants to ask and every June she wants to say yes. But their wants are never breathed, for scruples constrain them. And sadly, the door of heaven will close again in autumn.

Come October, the little band breaks up Compton by the same routine. They return to the townhouse with its ambitious schedule. Pilgrimages to Cedar Grove, opera at the Academy of Music, meetings of Colonial Dames. And in recent years, conferrals with attorneys, dignitaries. Things may be breaking up. But there will always be June and the rose garden.

She is standing on the threshold, but she is thinking of the past, of the day she arrived in Philadelphia, of the letters she wrote home about her American dream, the silver she’s polished, table linens pressed, cream teas served in the sunroom, thorns cut from roses. And the chauffeur’s
proposal, key to a realm they may never know, pendent between them.

*Down by Killarney’s green woods we did stray, the moon and the stars they were shining. The moon shone its rays on his locks of golden hair and he swore he’d be my love forever.*

She is watching Miss Morris take the arm of her gardener down below. They walk among the roses, getting smaller. Her tousled hair a brightness in the verdant room, a visual rhythm, like a signal fading from view. What would life be like without her, God forbid.

The gardener waves. It’s time to bring Miss Morris in for a rest.

In 1932, Lydia Thompson Morris died at the Compton estate in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, in the presence of her loyal household. And Jetta O’Toole—services rendered for twenty-three years—finally heard Mr. O’Neil breathe words more intoxicating than roses, “Will you marry me?”

Having remained in Miss Morris’s employ until her death, they each received an annuity which they pooled together and bought a nice house in Flourtown, and took vacations every now and then. Jetta died in 1958 and Jim in 1965. God rest their souls.
Who’s Who

Frank Mott Bartram (1871-1956)
Born in Darby, PA to Thomas Chalkley Bartram and Sarah Mott Brower. Member of the London Grove Meeting of Friends. Special agent with PA Department of Agriculture, then representative for William H. Moon nursery in 1900s. Moved to Kennett Square with sister Mary in 1910s. Served on the Kennett Square School Board from 1918 to 1949.

Ellen (Nellie) Donahue (1871-1947)

Patrick Finerghty (1834-1902)

Thomas Sovereign Gates (1873-1948)

Frank Gould (1854-1928)

Ellen Hume (1829-1922)

Louise Kellner (1837-1904)
Born to Eduard Kellner and Luisa ___ in Oldenburg, Germany. Served as nurse with Florence Nightingale during Crimean War 1854. Immigrated to U.S. 1876. Attended Training School for Nurses, Woman’s Hospital, Philadelphia 1878-1880. Naturalized in 1889. Nurse at Hahnemann Hospital, Philadelphia; promoted to principal of Training School for Nurses at Hahnemann 1890. Private nurse to Alice Green, New York City 1893. Traveled with John and Lydia Morris on international trips 1889-1890, 1894-1895, 1900, 1903.

Sidney Fiske Kimball (1888-1955)
Born in Newton, MA to Edwin Fiske Kimball and Ellen Leora Ripley. Awarded BA and MA in Architecture, Harvard

**John Francis McCloskey (1877-1951)**

**John Thompson Morris (1847-1915)**

**Lydia Thompson Morris (1849-1932)**

**Y Muto (abt 1861-?)**
Born in Tokyo, Japan. Parents unknown. Designed gardens in U.S.

**John Conrad Ohnemuller (1853-1935)**

**James Joseph O’Neil (1894-1965)**

**Bridget (Jetta) O’Toole (1889-1958)**

**Mary O’Toole (1884-1939)**
Elizabeth (Bessie) Herbert Stark Robert (1876-1963)

William Henry Dunlop Russell (1867-1945)

Maurice Bower Saul (1883-1974)

John Tonkin (1887-1975)
People of Compton

Sisters Mary O’Toole, Katherine O’Toole Sheehan, Jetta O’Toole, with niece Mary D. O’Toole, circa 1927

Jim O’Neil (center) with Compton employees, circa 1930

Katie McDonnell at Compton, 1904
People of Compton

James O’Neil with Lydia Morris’s Pierce Arrow, circa 1920

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About the Author

Joyce H. Munro has returned to a first love—creative writing—after a career in college administration. She has held positions at West Chester University, Chestnut Hill College, Centenary College and the National Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. She holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University and M.Ed. from the University of South Carolina. Her articles on educational leadership and professional development have appeared in academic journals and her books have been published by McGraw-Hill, Dushkin, and Educational Testing Service.


Along with writing, she volunteers in the Morris Arboretum Archives and leads continuing education “Behind the Scenes” classes at the Arboretum.