

Morris Park: A Green Urban Playground for Nature Lovers



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Dan Gasiewski, long term resident of the Overbrook Farms and executive director of Friends of Morris Park, remembers the days when the meadowlands entrance to Morris Park, at the corners of 66th Street and Woodcrest Avenue, used to be full of litter left by local residents.

In 2004, Gasiewski founded the Friends of Morris Park with his brother, Tom.

“We have been dedicating our weekends for the past ten years just to make Morris Park a better place,” said Gasiewski.

They started the small non-profit volunteer organization with the hopes to revitalize the 147-acre park, which is a part of the Fairmount Park Commission and spread across parts of Philadelphia and Montgomery counties.

“In addition to Overbrook Farms, we serve Northern Overbrook, Overbrook Park and Green Hill Farms,” said Julie Foster, president of the Friends of Morris Park. “We actually have a large number of residents of the park’s surrounding suburban areas – Lower Merion and Havertown – using the park.

The park’s roadway borders lie on City Line Avenue at its most western edge, through 66th Street’s residential area to the north and east. The park’s most southern point is at the corner of Lansdowne and Haverford avenues at Papa Playground.

Morris Park was created by the city of Philadelphia as a part of a donation to the city by Wistar Morris, of Philadelphia’s affluent Morris family, upon his death in 1891. Morris made the donation to the City Parks Association with the goal to help create parks in West Philadelphia to rival the park of Wissahickon.

The donation also prevented the park’s creek, Indian Creek, from becoming part of the city’s underground sewage system, as happened to several creeks in the city.

The most prominent parts of Morris Park are the creeks – East Branch Indian Creek and West Branch Indian Creek, which are both tributaries to Cobbs Creek and a part of the Cobbs Creek Park and Watershed.



(https://philadelphianeighborhoods.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/IMG_3302.jpg)

The corner of Woodcrest Avenue and 66th Street is the main entrance to Morris Park.



(<https://philadelphianeighborhoods.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Screen-Shot-2014-06-27-at-1.39.03-PM.png>)

“It is the most bio-diverse part of Cobbs Creek Park,” said Foster. “It is a natural respite and oasis in an urban landscape but it also is a great free space place for families to spend time with their kids.”

However, the park had not been maintained by the city of Philadelphia until the arrival of Friends of Morris Park. The Friends of Morris Park was the first group to create a plan for the conservation of the park since the 1930s, when President Franklin D.

The West Branch Indian Creek flows towards the larger Cobb Creek.

Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration(WPA) employees cared for the park.

"We have restored all the trails, taking out the invasive plants and removing the abandoned cars left in the park," explained Gasiewski. "We have been working for ten years to create the experience people have when they walk through our park."

Morris Park currently has picnic areas, locations for group gatherings and two miles of safe and maintained trails for hiking, biking, and bird and wildlife watching.

"Whether you know anything about them or not it is nice to get into a natural area where the air is clean and it is nice for individuals, the community and families can get out and do together," said Gasiewski.

Some residents in the area say the park is part of the reason to live in this section of Philadelphia. However, there are residents who do not know about Morris Park. Anna Petruncio, who lives in Overbrook Farms, just learned of the neighborhood amenity.

"I got an email from my landlord about a free concert (in the park)," said Petruncio. "Now we love it. It is a major selling point. We bring our lovely dog out here to stretch his legs."



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Members of the West Philadelphia Orchestra perform free concert in Morris Park.

Friends of Morris Park recently applied for an activities grant with the city of Philadelphia to help bring a series of summer concerts to the park, adding to the services the park brings to the community.

"One of our missions as a group is to maintain and preserve the natural woodlands of the park," said Foster. "The other is to make it a service (available) for people to come together. It is a wonderful opportunity to bring neighbors who share interesting concerns to come meet each other for the first time and become a part of the

community."

Gasiewski is proud of the developments he has contributed to his community.

"Now, they know about Morris Park," said Gasiewski. "They are going to come back."

Morris Park's trails are open from 6 a.m. until 8 p.m.

Philadelphia Water

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History

Cobbs Creek Watershed History



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Bridge over Cobbs Creek at Whitby Avenue. Built by members of the Sherwood Improvement Co. Date not noted, probably ca. 1900. Free Library of Philadelphia Print & Picture Collection.

The settlement of Philadelphia began along the Delaware River in the 17th century and slowly crept westward. It was not until the late 19th century that dense urban development reached the watershed of Cobbs Creek, which forms part of the western boundary of the city. Long before then, Dutch, Swedish and finally the English and German immigrants inhabited and farmed in the area beginning in the mid-17th century. The oldest mill in Philadelphia, built by the Swedish settlers on Cobbs Creek in 1642, stood just upstream from where Woodland Avenue now crosses the creek. By the 19th century, dozens of other water-powered mills - producing flour, paper, textiles, and other products - had set up shop along Cobbs Creek and its major tributaries, Naylor's Run and Indian Creek.

Main transportation routes to and through the watershed included several turnpikes that followed the diagonal routes of the current Woodland, Baltimore and Lancaster avenues. Several railroads with both freight and passenger service were built in the decades before the Civil War, and afterwards trolleys (first horse-drawn and later electric) served to spur residential development in the areas they served.



Mills along Indian Creek near 65th Street and Havenford Avenue - 1915. Photograph by John W. Eddfield. Note the rows of houses built up to the edge of the valley. This mill, situated at the confluence of the east and west branches of Indian Creek, was eventually torn down, and the playing fields in Morris Park were built on the filled and leveled location. Free Library of Philadelphia Print & Picture Collection

Development Pattern

The wholesale transformation of the watershed - from mostly open farmland, meadows and woodland with scattered villages and small industrial centers into a mostly developed residential area - began in the later part of the 19th century. Two infrastructure projects stimulated this transformation. The completion of the Mill Creek sewer in West Philadelphia in 1895, which obliterated the stream and its valley, allowed the urban grid of streets and residences to continue unimpeded toward Cobbs Creek. In 1908, the completion of the Market Street section of the Market-Frankford Elevated Railroad, or the "El," allowed quick access into the city for suburban dwellers and greatly spurred residential construction in the western parts of Philadelphia and eastern Delaware County. Between 1910 and 1930, 2,000 new houses a year were built in West Philadelphia, with similar housing booms occurring somewhat later in the suburban communities closest to the city, including Yeadon, Darby, and Upper Darby.

By the 1930s, most of the factories in the watershed had closed, leaving abandoned buildings as the main reminder of the area's once-thriving industrial heritage. Residential development continued to spread, with large sections of Overbrook Park in Philadelphia built up after World War II, and continuing into Haverford and Lower Merion Townships in the 1950s and 1960s, although at a considerably lower density.



Woodland Avenue at Cobbs Creek, looking upstream. Old bridge, left, on October 22, 1908. Note the open sewer emptying its contents into the creek. This old bridge was replaced by a new concrete bridge (left), shown in 1909. Philadelphia City Archives

Development Leads to Stream Degradation

As in other parts of the city, rapid urbanization led to the degradation of stream quality in several ways. Several Cobbs Creek tributaries within Philadelphia were encapsulated in combined sewers, the largest being Thomas Run. Also known as Ameeska Creek, this stream had its source near 53rd and Walnut streets and flowed into Cobbs Creek at about 60th Street. Thousands of feet of Naylor's Run in Upper Darby Township were channeled into underground culverts to facilitate commercial and residential development in the filled land above the pipes. A massive increase in impervious surfaces in the watershed meant that runoff reached the creek more quickly, leading to higher storm flows, and increased erosion and scouring of the stream banks and bed. Sewers from the new neighborhoods in the watershed emptied directly into the creek and its tributaries, polluting the water with raw sewage. By 1914, Philadelphia had constructed an interceptor sewer that captured wastes and prevented them from entering the creek, but it took decades longer before communities in neighboring Delaware and Montgomery counties did the same. In more recent times, combined sewer overflows, polluted stormwater runoff and inadequate drainage systems, leaking and inadequate septic tanks, lack of open space for recreation, illegal dumping, and an array of other urban ills have also taken their toll on the quality of human and natural life in the watershed.

Open Space Preserved

Beginning in the mid-19th century, a number of cemetery companies bought up large tracts of the watershed, establishing Mt. Moriah, Fernwood, Holy Cross, and Arlington cemeteries. As the farmsteads in the watershed, one by one, were

subdivided and transformed into residential neighborhoods, these cemeteries kept hundreds of acres of open space out of the hands of real estate developers. The creation of Cobbs Creek Park in the beginning of the 20th century preserved hundreds of acres of open space in Philadelphia and Delaware counties. The donation of Morris Park to the city preserved Indian Creek from being encapsulated in an underground sewer, which had been proposed for this stream by 19th-century city planners. The long-fought battle to preserve a section of Tinicum Marsh finally ended with its elevation to the status of National Wildlife Refuge, providing another natural respite in the tidal reaches of the watershed. A final battle was fought by residents of the watershed against plans to blast an expressway through the Cobbs Creek valley. Interstate 695 would have begun at I-95 near Essington and connected with another expressway at Whitby Avenue in West Philadelphia. These plans were killed in the mid-1970s, with the money diverted into mass transportation projects.



Cobbs Creek in 1880. location not noted. Photograph by John W. Eskildt. Free Library of Philadelphia Print & Picture Collection

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GREENHILL HOTEL

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Green Hill

Like other Welshmen who were persecuted for their Quaker faith, brothers Charles and Thomas Lloyd were members of a landed aristocratic family, the Lloyds of Dolobran. In 1682, the Lloyd brothers, along with Welsh Quaker leader John ap John, gained ownership of a sizeable portion of the 40,000 acre Welsh Tract. Their rectangular parcel included the southeast corner of Lower Merion, and south and west of the corner of Lancaster Pike and City Avenue.

Thomas Lloyd, his wife, and their children arrived in Pennsylvania in June 1683 after an eight week journey on the ship *America*. Lloyd's wife, Mary, died shortly after their arrival. Three of Lloyd's daughters would later marry men who would each serve as mayor of Philadelphia. Educated at Oxford, Lloyd's rare qualities became apparent in the developing city of Philadelphia. William Penn appointed Lloyd, only a year after his arrival, president of the Provincial Council. (When Penn returned to England, he put his wigs in Lloyd's care with the stipulation that he could use them if he wished).

Upon Lloyd's death at age 54, an unimproved 118 acre tract was sold to David Price, Yoeman, of Merion, who immediately settled on the farmland in 1694. On land, identified from then on as the Greenhill tract, Price built a solid stone house, known for 269 years as the Old Homestead. Over the next dozen years, Price added adjacent land until he owned almost 300 acres.

In 1731, Price conveyed 207 of those acres to his son Issachar, a carpenter: "...houses, outhouses, Edifices and Buildings." For almost 30 years the property was leased to a succession of farmers: John Hughes, John Evans (who owned land northwest of the Hughes farm), and Ludwig Knoll.



Rare photo (c. 1940s) of the Old Homestead, built in 1695 by David Price. It was demolished in 1964 to make way for the Green Hill Apartments.

John Hughes was active in colonial affairs, member of the Pennsylvania Assembly, and friend of Benjamin Franklin (who appointed him Stamp Distributor for the Provinces).

Upon his death in 1772, Hughes' land was inherited by his son, John, Jr.

John Hughes, Jr. married Margaret Pashall, the great granddaughter of one of the original Lower Merion settlers, Dr. Thomas Wynne. Both John and Margaret died in their twenties, leaving two daughters. The orphaned sisters were raised at Greenhill by a cousin, Mary Hollingsworth. But the Hughes girls, unmarried, both died in their twenties.

In 1799 Mary married Israel W. Morris, a well-to-do broker and commission merchant, and son of Captain Samuel Morris of Revolutionary War fame. About 12 years later, the couple moved from Philadelphia to Mary's farm at Greenhill.



Israel W. Morris, photographed by his son, Wistar.



Israel Morris' residence, built in 1862.

From 1815 to 1835, the Morris' leased the farmland section (... "except for Mansion, lawns, raspberry patch, bath house, old barns, orchard, fields & meadows...") to John Esray. At Mary Morris' early death, the Greenhill tract was inherited by Israel and

their children, Wistar, Hannah and Jane, all born at the Old Homestead.

Wistar Morris, founder of Morris, Tasker & Company in Philadelphia, held many positions of importance in Philadelphia. He was also a director of the Pennsylvania Railroad, president of the Board of Pennsylvania Hospital and trustee of Haverford College.

In 1863, Wistar married Mary Harris and built a large stone mansion 300 yards west of Old Homestead.

Their only daughter, Holly, was born the following year. Thirty years later, Wistar remodeled the spacious country house and built a copy of a castle in Scotland of granite, designed by Mantle Fielding, and trimmed with fossiliferous limestone.

Holly married Rev. Charles Wood but died eight years later, also leaving two small children, Margaret Paschal and Charles Morris who were raised by their grandmother, Mary Harris Morris, in the mansion. Margaret married Logan McCoy; Charles managed the Green Hill Farms Hotel. Wistar Morris' elaborate Green Hill Farm, with 18 acres, was sold to Friends' Central School in 1925.



Wistar and Mary Morris with their daughter, Holly.



Wistar Morris' Green Hill estate, purchased by Friends' Central School in 1925.

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The Ball Room

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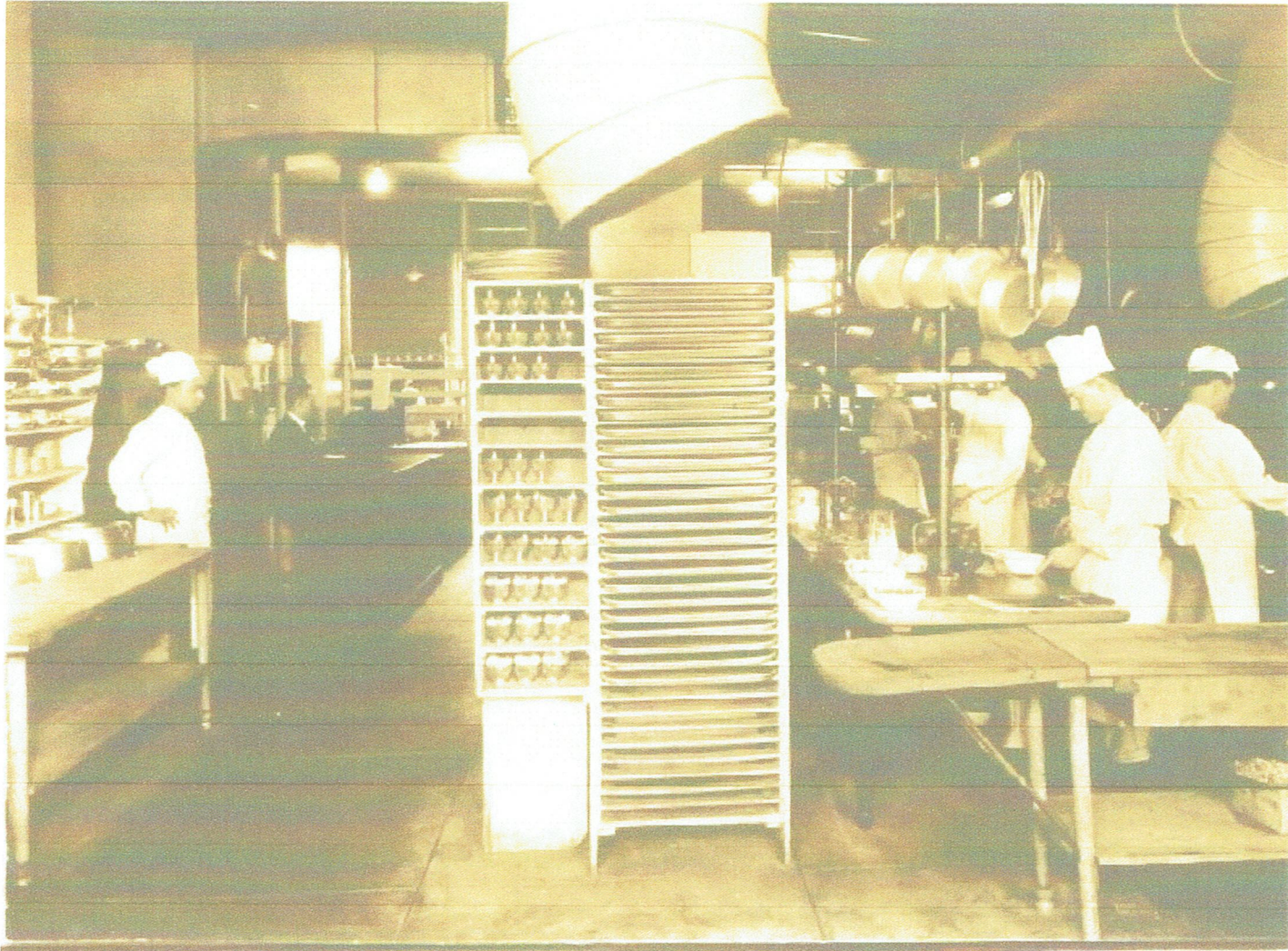
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The Kitchen

Photos of the Green Hill Farms Hotel (above) and The Palmer (below) via Cross Properties

Originally constructed as "**a respite for Philadelphia's elite and intelligentsia**" in the 1920s, The Palmer is now primed for its reincarnation as a luxury apartment complex. Designed by famed Philadelphia architect **Horace Trumbauer**, the structure opened in 1922 as Green Hill Farms Hotel. The Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary later converted the resort into classrooms and dormitories in 1939, and added a chapel in 1951. In 2012, Cross Properties purchased the building, and placed it on the **National Register of Historic Places**. After a \$35 million adaptive reuse and redevelopment of the eight-acre property, the 120,000-square-foot complex is set for its grand opening at the beginning of May.

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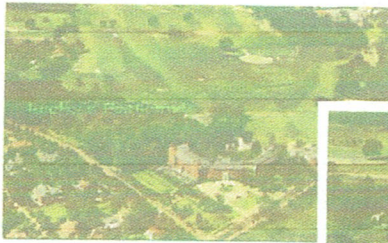
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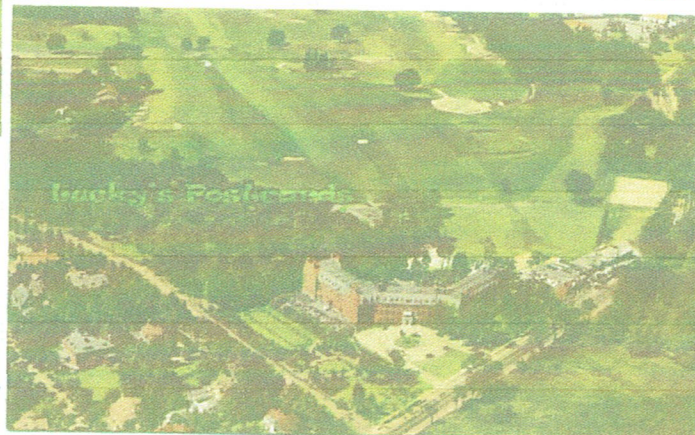
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The Lower Merion Historical Society



Title: Old Homestead, Wynnewood (photo c.1940s)

Abstract: Built in 1695 by David Price

Keywords: Old Homestead/Price, David/Green Hill Apartments

Source: Lower Merion Historical Society Archives

Binder: 1

Collection: W. Robert Swartz

This photo and many others may be found in *The First 300: The Amazing and Rich History of Lower Merion*, which may be purchased through Diane Publishing Company or in Lower Merion area [book stores](#).



The Lower Merion Historical Society



Title: Wistar Morris' Green Hill Estate, Wynnewood

Abstract: House designed by Mantle Fielding; sold to Friends' Central School in 1925

Keywords: Morris, Israel W./Fielding, Mantle/Friends' Central School

Source: Philadelphia and Notable Philadelphians, Moses King, 1902

Binder: 1

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