



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF MORVEN MUSEUM & GARDEN

Morven means “big hill” in Gaelic, from a quotation in the epic poems of Ossian: “Sons of Morven spread the feast / Send the night away in song.”

Governors, Gardens, and a Reckoning

Home to a signer of the Declaration of Independence, five New Jersey governors and countless legendary tales, Morven Museum & Garden in Princeton is celebrating its twentieth anniversary.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI

Morven is a house built upon poetry. The National Historic Landmark building, set on five exquisite acres in Princeton, dates to the birth of America and served as New Jersey’s first governor’s mansion. Its story is the stuff of legend, both real and mythical. And this year, as the Morven Museum & Garden celebrates its twentieth anniversary, historians are still teasing out fact from the storytelling that put Morven on the map—as will visitors who browse the garden, which

gives a nod to the first owners’ love for cultivating flowers and plants, or take in the extensive timeline that runs the expanse of the house, detailing the people, events, and artifacts that tell the history of this historic home. Morven does not shy away from exploring the home’s role in slavery. In its collection are documents cataloguing the women, men, and children held in bondage on these very grounds. Other archives document the property owners’ efforts to capture runaway slaves.

Morven was built in the 1750s by Richard Stockton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, on property granted to Stockton's grandfather by William Penn. Stockton's wife, Annis Boudinot Stockton, one of America's earliest published female poets, immortalized heroes of the Revolution, such as George Washington, who called her "the Muse of Morven." Annis derived the property's name—"big hill" in Gaelic—from a quotation in the epic poems of Ossian: "Sons of Morven spread the feast/Send the night away in song."

The garden, inspired by Richard Stockton's visit to Alexander Pope's Twickenham Garden in London, was a manifestation of the couple's love: Annis married native plants with the unusual roots and bulbs that Richard shipped home from his overseas travels. She later memorialized their shared passion in her poem "Short Elegy to the Memory of Her Husband."

Visitors to Morven will learn the creation of the garden and the running of the house was built on the blood and sweat of enslaved people. Along with the loving letters and bulbs that Richard sent from overseas were directives to Annis, such as this note from 1766: "Tell the Servants if they behave well I will reward them when I return, and if ill, I will punish them."

Inside Morven, the walls present a detailed timeline, paintings and photos that lead you through a spirited chronology of lineage and intrigue: After Richard the Signer, the house passed to his son Richard ("The Duke"), then to his grandson, Robert Fields Stockton ("The Commodore"), who died in debt, forcing Morven into the hands of a cousin, who maintained it as a working farm until selling it in 1890 to Charles W. Shields, a Princeton University professor. Shields later gifted Morven to his daughter, Charlotte, upon her

marriage to Bayard Stockton, Richard's great-great-grandson. Although Charlotte died before moving in, her half-sister, Helen, took up residence when she married Bayard.

At first glance, Morven held little appeal for Helen Stockton. But as the Colonial Revival design movement swept the nation around the turn of the twentieth century, she had a change of heart. She knew Washington had visited Morven, says Greer Luce, the curator of education and public programs, and that the British had invaded the house in 1776, capturing Stockton, looting his possessions, and subsequently imprisoning him. "Helen realized, 'Wow, I'm the mistress of a home to a signer of the Declaration of Independence,'" Luce says.

Helen Stockton invested in restoring Morven to its Colonial design and creating a Colonial Revival Garden in what she perceived to be the poetess' vision. She also promoted Morven as a historic property, although her knack for creative embellishment leaves the current staff, more than a century later, still separating fact from fiction. "She said the Icehouse was the slave quarters, but the enlargement post-dates slavery," Luce says. "She also

famously held a 200th anniversary party around the turn of the century, but Morven wasn't built until the 1750s."

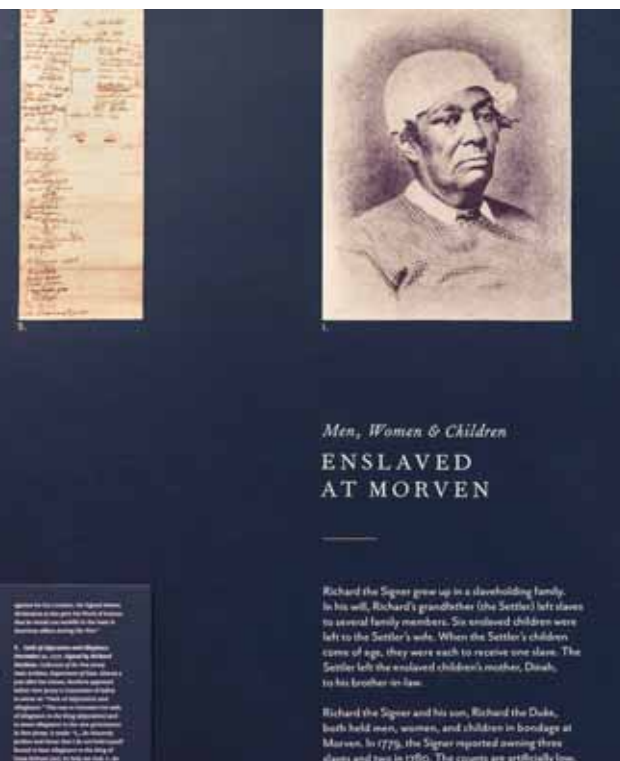
More myths abound in the garden, according to horticulturalist Louise Senior. "Helen would find bulbs and proclaim, 'This is Colonial!'" Senior says.

The garden today keeps pace with Helen's recreation. "In the summertime, you will see a lot of phlox, zinnias, dahlias ... " says Senior, her voice trailing as she walks into a path framed by boxwood hedges with a sundial at its heart, a relic from Helen Stockton. Peering down, she reads the poem inscribed on the face, "The Sun-Dial At Morven" by Henry Van Dyke: "Two hundred years of blessing I record/For Morven's house, protected by the Lord:/And still I stand among old-fashioned flowers/To mark for Morven many sunlit hours."

Morven's mid-century modern pool house and apple-shaped pool (now a concrete splashpad) are credited to Robert Wood Johnson, who leased Morven from the widowed Helen Stockton from 1928 to 1944. When Johnson moved out, Walter Edge, about to commence his second term as governor, offered to buy Morven with the intention of making



Horticulturalists maintain the garden at Morven as it was originally, without chemicals or mulch.



it New Jersey's first governor's mansion. (Look for the new birdbath in the garden dedicated to Edge.) Helen agreed—with one stipulation: If it stopped serving as a gubernatorial home, Morven would be preserved as a historic site. When Edge sold Morven to the state of New Jersey in 1954 for \$1, it became home to four subsequent governors—Robert Meyner, Richard Hughes, William Cahill, and Brendan Byrne—and welcomed many famous guests, among them John F. Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Grace Kelly, and Buzz Aldrin.

After the governors were relocated to Drumthwacket, less than a mile south on Route 206, in 1982, Morven was extensively renovated, eventually opening as a museum in 2004. In 2018 the Stockton Education Center was completed, a 3,000-square-foot contemporary building used for workshops, lectures, and other events.



The room-by-room timeline that unfolds Morven's complicated history does not shy away from the uncomfortable fact that a signer of the Declaration of Independence once held slaves on the property.



The wall text inside Morven's museum lays bare the property's role in slavery: Two generations of the Stockton family held Black people in bondage—as many as eighteen enslaved people over two generations, although that number is likely an undercount, Luce says, owing to gaps in the historical records. In 1804, New Jersey passed a law providing for the “gradual emancipation of slaves.” Under the law, children of enslaved people born after July 4, 1804, would be freed when they reached the age of 21 for women and 25 for men. By the time Robert Stockton took possession of the home in 1840, census records show there were no enslaved people living at Morven. At his sugarcane plantation in Georgia, however, Robert Stockton continued to keep more than 100 men, women, and children enslaved.

The museum is expanding the narrative of its slavery history with the assistance of Sharece Blakney, a research consultant and historian who has conducted more than 900 hours of research on slavery at Morven. “A signer of the Declaration of Independence built this house, which is also where people were enslaved,” Luce says. “We use our role as a site that holds these complications as a jumping-off point for important discussions of nuances in our history and a platform to

engage with our community regarding what it means to be an American and how can we support one another.”

The current exhibition, “Morven Revealed: Untold Stories from New Jersey’s Most Historic Home,” on view



through March 2, 2025, sheds light on the home’s lesser-known tales—the children who lived there, the pets, guests, celebrations, and the experiences of immigrant servants—through rarely exhibited objects and newly discovered

photographs. “It provides a lighter, human look,” Luce says, “at what it would have been like to live in the house.”

Explore Morven on your own or call ahead to schedule a docent-led tour Wednesdays through Sundays. Afterwards, secure a table at Mistral Restaurant (66 Witherspoon Street), where chef Scott Anderson has curated a menu of inventive dishes sourced from local purveyors. (Locals insist, for good cause, that you sample the Szechuan wings.) Follow with a scoop of artisanal ice cream—lavender mascarpone, say—at The Bent Spoon (35 Palmer Square West). The recent opening of the Graduate Princeton hotel (10 Chambers Street) is reason enough to stay the weekend and explore both the busy downtown and the stunning Georgian campus.

If you time your visit for Morven’s Fourth of July Jubilee, you just might witness a bit of Morven magic. “When Richard the Signer built the house, he planted thirteen catalpa trees in the front yard,” Senior says. “Those trees died in the 1920s and were replaced around 2000. And what is really interesting is when catalpas bloom: Around the Fourth of July.”

Patti Zielinski is the chief arts writer for River Towns.

An excerpt from “A Short Elegy to the Memory of Her Husband”

*Those fragrant bowers were
planted by his hand!
And now neglected and
unprun’d must stand.*

*Ye stately elms and lofty
cedars mourn!
Slow through your avenues you
saw him borne,
The friend who rear’d you, never
to return.*

—Annis Boudinot Stockton



The wisteria draped across the front portico first appears in photographs taken in the 1880s.