Mount Moriah Cemetery: 
Revitalizing a Southwest Philadelphia Asset

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Introduction

Mount Moriah is a historic cemetery located in Southwest Philadelphia’s Kingsessing neighborhood. Once a picturesque and spanning rural cemetery, Mount Moriah closed in 2011 and its maintenance has since been neglected. The Friends of Mount Moriah Cemetery is a volunteer group dedicated to preserving the cemetery, both as a way to honor those buried there, and because of the opportunities the cemetery offers as a historical site, natural sanctuary, and community green space. The Friends have a clear vision for Mount Moriah, but need resources to achieve these goals. During the last ten weeks, the Mount Moriah Project interns have tackled multiple projects for the cemetery, including generating the first map of all the cemeteries in Philadelphia, assembling data on over 150 burials, gauging community interest in using the cemetery as a green space, researching programming opportunities and developing connections with potential partners, and exploring and evaluated grant opportunities. The following is a summary of the future of Mount Moriah and potential the cemetery can offer as a community space, with support from the City.

I. History of Mount Moriah

Located in Southwest Philadelphia, Mount Moriah Cemetery is a hidden historic gem clouded by years of neglect. Mount Moriah was incorporated in 1855 through an act of the Pennsylvania Legislature and in the midst of the rural cemetery movement of the eighteenth century. The Mount Moriah Cemetery Association has owned and operated the cemetery since its incorporation. Large for its time, the cemetery began as fifty-four acres and has since
quadrupled in size. Over the past one hundred and sixty years, both the living and the dead have made use of the sprawling grounds of Mount Moriah Cemetery. Throughout the Victorian Era, it was not uncommon to respectfully use cemetery grounds for family gatherings, picnics, and the like. As such, it is likely that Mount Moriah was often visited by out of town folks intending to spend an entire day celebrating and remembering the life of passed relatives and friends.

In addition to the historic age of Mount Moriah, it is also revered for the Old Gatehouse designed by Stephen Decatur Button. Button was an American architect well known for his structures featuring metal frameworks rather than the traditional masonry block. The Old Gatehouse was designed as the main entrance to Mount Moriah off what is now known as Kingsessing Avenue. A life size statue of Father Time originally sat atop the gatehouse as a morbid reminder to visitors of how quickly time may pass. Father Time has since been moved to mark the nearby grave of John H. Jones, the original owner of Mount Moriah.

One of Mount Moriah’s greatest assets is the diverse array of those interred beneath its scenic landscape. This community ranges from veterans of the armed forces, successful businessmen, and leaders in the Philadelphia community, to common people whose stories have not yet been told. All of those for whom Mount Moriah is the final resting place make a contribution to Mount Moriah’s unique history. The cemetery’s past continues to enrich it today and makes it an asset for the City.

Mount Moriah is the final resting place of over 1,000 veterans who served in the nation’s armed forces. Amazingly, 21 of those veterans were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest honor given to members of the United States armed forces. These 21 individuals exemplified exceptional valor, but there are countless other veterans whose legacy has become
part of Mount Moriah’s. The Friends of Mount Moriah group publishes biographies on its website of veterans whose stories and gravesites are known. Additionally, new pictures of veteran headstones are posted to the group’s Facebook page, and their biographies researched and updated.

Although the stories of many of Mount Moriah’s veterans have sadly been forgotten, those who are known give the cemetery its unique status. Mount Moriah is the final resting place of veterans from every American war from the Revolution through the Vietnam War. It is known that at least eight black veterans who served in the War of 1812, Civil War, and Spanish-American War are interred in the Naval plot. It is also known that at least three female veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War are interred in the cemetery. There are even four men who served in the Confederate military during the Civil War. There are countless other notables in the cemetery, whose stories and legacies are waiting to be discovered.

Mount Moriah is also notable for having several prominent national and Philadelphia icons as part of its community. The most notable name is Betsy Ross, the woman who, according to legend, sewed the first stars-and-stripes flag for the United States. Ross was interred at Mount Moriah until she was disinterred and removed to the Betsy Ross House in Old City. While Ross is the most recognizable name nationally, many other prominent Philadelphians rest in the cemetery. William Burns Smith, who served as the Republican Mayor of Philadelphia from 1884-7 is buried at Mount Moriah. Another is politician Israel Wilson Durham, who served as a Republican state senator from Philadelphia. Durham would later be part of an investment group that would purchase the Philadelphia Phillies, for which he became president. Lewis Dubois Bassett is a familiar name too, the dessert fanatic. He was the founder of the popular Bassett’s
Ice Cream, which is located throughout the city and Greater Philadelphia area. Unique to Philadelphia culture is George Wesley Stroby, one of the four founders of the annual Mummer’s Day Parade. These people have carved out a niche in Philadelphia history and culture, and their legacies are part of the Mount Moriah Cemetery.

In addition to celebrities, Mount Moriah is also home to a wide range of occupations and stories of working-class Philadelphians. Combined, these people give the cemetery its unique appeal. For a long time, Mount Moriah was one of the few cemeteries that allowed burials according to Islamic religious traditions. As a result, the cemetery has a sizable number of Muslim burials. The Friends of Mount Moriah documented at least five former professional baseball players interred at the cemetery. There are known actors, performers, and ballerinas interred on the grounds as well. Philadelphia police officers, lawyers, and local politicians constitute others interred. There are even documented gangsters, fraudulent business owners, and a fraudulent author who sold false war stories. Those interred at Mount Moriah offer a precious glimpse into Philadelphia’s past through the lives of its people. The story of Mount Moriah truly is that of its people, which makes it one with the story of Philadelphia.

Now well over 150 acres, the cemetery is one of the largest remaining examples of nineteenth century cemeteries. As such, it is a crucial piece of property that can be used as a lens into the decades of past. Unfortunately, time has taken its toll on Mount Moriah and the consequences have been drastic. In 2011, the last remaining employee of the Mount Moriah Cemetery Association passed, leaving the cemetery to succumb to overgrowth and vandalism. Without anyone caring for the grounds, Mount Moriah teetered on the edge between historical masterpiece and irrelevancy. However, thanks to the efforts of a small nonprofit band of
volunteers known as The Friends of Mount Moriah, there is finally hope again for this incredible hallowed ground. With the City of Philadelphia’s help, Mount Moriah can be restored to its past glory as a cemetery of honor and remembrance.

II. Maps and Cemetery Association

Mt. Moriah Cemetery is located in the Kingsessing neighborhood of Southwest Philadelphia. The Philadelphia half of the cemetery is easily accessible by the 13 trolley line. The cemetery is also accessible by bicycle with near by bike lanes and the neighboring Cobb’s Creek Trail. This cemetery is one of many, including Laurel Hill Cemetery The Woodlands, and many others in the area that is large enough to be used as a green space as well as a burial grounds. As seen on the map, Mt. Moriah is separated from the other cemeteries and the Fairmount Park System, in a neighborhood that does not have a lot of green space, making it all the more crucial that the cemetery is cleared, restored, and accessible to the
public. There is currently no formal cemetery association in Philadelphia. The city is home to a rich variety of cemeteries that vary greatly in size, style, and religious affiliation. Philadelphia is home to small historic burial grounds in the heart of Old City like the Christ Church Burial Ground, as well as sprawling Victorian cemeteries like the Laurel Hill and the Woodlands, which more similarly resemble Mount Moriah. There are currently websites which provide some basic information regarding Philadelphia cemeteries, like names, locations, and affiliation. These websites are convenient for finding cemetery addresses, but they do not showcase the diversity of size and location of Philadelphia cemeteries. Creating an association with these cemeteries would bring publicity to Mt. Moriah, and, alongside restoration efforts, would the locals and all city residents to see the cemetery as a usable green space and a space where they can see the cemetery while also learning about its history and wildlife.

We have compiled a more detailed list of Philadelphia cemetery information as well as a map of cemeteries in Philadelphia. Working along with these other cemeteries would be beneficial to this process, because they have already instituted some of the programing that our
group, the city and the locals are interested in seeing in Mt. Moriah. These cemeteries will be able to learn from each other as they are able to share more information. In addition to an information directory, we have created a map of cemeteries within Philadelphia’s boundaries. This map was created with city land use data that did not previously contain cemetery names.

III. Community Engagement

In order to understand how the surrounding community engages with Mount Moriah Cemetery, our group visited with local residents on a Friday afternoon and asked them a series of questions. We wanted to assess both their current level of engagement as well as their hopes for how the cemetery can serve them in the future. With the initiatives taken by other historic Philadelphia cemeteries in mind, our group chose to ask five questions that included: (1) Have you ever visited Mount Moriah? (2) Have you heard of events like nature walks, bird watching and firefly nights occurring in other cemeteries around Philadelphia like the Woodlands? (3) Do you perceive Mount Moriah as a usable community green space? (4) Are you familiar with efforts to revitalize Mt. Moriah Cemetery? (5) What types of community events would you like to see in your area?

In all, nearly a quarter (24%) of the 25 residents surveyed reported they had relatives buried within the cemetery, and 84% of the residents expressed interest in community programs hosted at the cemetery. In addition, 76% of respondents believed that Mount Moriah could one day serve as a community green space. Many residents understood the cemetery’s potential, and wanted to take advantage of its more than 200 acres of rolling hills and Cobbs creek. Whereas one individual was hesitant about hosting events in a place of burial, another wanted to see
summer recreational activities for local children. A resident who frequents the cemetery has noticed eagles, hawks, and blue jays flying around and hopes to organize bird walks for public enjoyment.

As a result of this survey and after speaking with Paulette, Board President of the Friends of Mount Moriah, our group has identified several local organizations important to developing a strong relationship between the surrounding community and the cemetery. The Delaware Valley Ornithology Club based at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia currently conducts field trips to Mount Moriah during the spring months to spot several species of warblers and sparrows. Every year the Club hosts the Philadelphia Bird Race fundraiser for novice and experienced bird watchers to compete by spotting as many species as possible in southwestern PA in one week’s time. Proceeds from this event support broadening the Club’s audience and improving locations popular to birds, and it is our group’s hope that the cemetery’s surrounding community takes advantage of this event to enjoy the wildlife within Mount Moriah while beautifying a bird’s environment.

The Kingsessing Recreation Center located 1.5 miles away from Mount Moriah and Cobbs Creek hosts a summer day camp that offers sports including tennis, basketball, and baseball for students in the community. Our group hopes that these students can take advantage of the Cobbs Creek that cuts through Mount Moriah and divides Philadelphia and Delaware Counties by participating in science trips run by the Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Center. A non-profit organization founded alongside the creek, the Center educates students on the role the environment plays in everyone’s life through hands-on activities and research of the Darby-Cobbs Watershed. By engaging children with the creek’s wildlife, the Environmental
Center in partnership with the Recreational Center would help local residents understand the importance of maintaining the cemetery for its natural beauty.

IV. Program Analysis and Opportunities at Mount Moriah

The Mount Moriah Cemetery offers opportunities to address issues Southwest Philadelphia faces and to provide opportunities for community development and educational enrichment in the Mount Moriah neighborhood. According to the City of Philadelphia’s 2014 Community Health Assessment, Southwest Philadelphia has the worst-performing health indicators for high blood pressure and obesity. With the opportunities to have programming that engages residents in recreational activities, this usable green space can be a tool in addressing some of the communities deepest challenges. Nearby cemeteries such as the Woodlands offer bike and walking paths that can be developed at Mount Moriah to offer residents safe and accessible ways to explore nature and exercise. Connecting Mount Moriah to existing bike trails, such as the East Coast Greenway, creates opportunities to bring in more visitors to the cemetery grounds.

The residents of Mount Moriah want to see programming at the cemetery. 76% of respondents polled by Mayor’s Interns of the City of Philadelphia felt that Mount Moriah was a usable green space while 84% of respondents indicated they would like to see some form of programming at Mount Moriah Cemetery. Recognizing the community need and desire for programming at Mount Moriah Cemetery, combined with the residents’ own preferences for programming, it is paramount the City of Philadelphia actively meet this need.
In addition to opportunities for nature walks and recreational activities, there is ample opportunity for a diverse range of educational programming because of the cemetery’s rich history, arboretum status and wildlife. City of Philadelphia Interns have reached out to several potential programming sources at Mount Moriah to illustrate the feasible and real opportunities that exist for the Cemetery as a cultural, environmental and educational hub for the community.

Currently, Mount Moriah has partnerships with several programming sources. These programming sources come from a variety of backgrounds. Mount Moriah has a wonderful partnership with the Audubon Society of Philadelphia, which has secured plantings that will attract birds and hopefully begin birding tours next year. They have also partnered with Wild West Philly, an organization committed to growing urban ecological literacy. The Wild West Philly Stewards have hosted nature walks at Mount Moriah with naturalists to educate on the ecological diversity at the cemetery, which is home to a variety of birds including starlings, robins, kingbird, and even kestrel. The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University is another potential partner for Mount Moriah. They have successfully worked with other green spaces like the Woodlands and would provide a great deal of educational programming to the cemetery. These programming sources will allow Mount Moriah to capitalize on the rich and diverse ecology found at the cemetery.

Interns with the City of Philadelphia have contacted organizations throughout the city in order to find new programming sources that will fit with the community’s needs. The Renegade Company, a theatre company that creates original theatrical experiences that celebrate, challenge, and deconstruct iconic works of art, is a potential and excited partner. The company performed *Beowulf/Grendel* at Mount Moriah in April and had about 75% West Philadelphia residents
(75%) attend (They had about 10% specifically from the Kingsessing neighborhood out of the 75%). For this production, the company had very concise conversations with people from that neighborhood about the project, the themes, and its relationship to the community. Mike Durkin, artistic director for the company, stated “many of the people I talked to were very excited about activating the cemetery and making people aware of it”.

In addition to those sources, the Friends of Mount Moriah are continually working on creating a green space corridor connection with the Woodlands, Bartram’s Garden, Mount Moriah and the Heinz. They are planning a tour of the Woodlands, Bartram’s Garden and Mount Moriah with the principles in September to discuss creating a Southwest Philly green space tour. They also hope to work with the Philadelphia Bee Company to begin programming since they have a apiary onsite. Working alongside other established green spaces will allow Mount Moriah to become a part of a green space network which will attract more tourists and members of the surrounding community.

V. The Use of Grants and Law Concerning Mt Moriah Cemetery

Mt Moriah has a long and interesting history with the City of Philadelphia. For the past few years it has gone from a place of neglect to one that more and more people are giving attention. The city government is no different and are now working towards updating Mt Moriah. This summer multiple people have put together a plan to aid the restoration of Mt Moriah.

One of the major ways to do this is through applying and then receiving grants. However, there were roadblock in the process of applying for grants. Most grants are only awarded if there is a definitive plan in place that outlines how the money will be used. Other grants award money
only if there is a successful plan that has already shown results and the grant money will just continue that work. Ultimately grants were difficult to come by because there was a lack of a long term plan that would insure that the money would be permanently beneficial.

Due to these factors other avenues for revenue were looked into like partnerships with already established organizations. Also, in order to make sure Mt Moriah was maximizing potential legal research was conducted. This legal research unearthed two important laws. The first is that the cemetery cannot be classified as “abandoned” as long as “interred remain and the existence of graves is indicated.” This is taken from pg. 84 #39 PA Law Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition. Ultimately this means that the land will stay as open green space and will not be developed. This leads to the second area of law concerning Acquisition and Disposition of Land. Cemetery land “cannot be sold and applied to other uses” according to pg. 89 of the PA Law Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition.

Mt Moriah also crosses the Pennsylvania state line and should therefore be available for Federal funding. The main Federal grant would come from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, more commonly known as The Stimulus Package. It was set up so money would still be available until 2019. It especially has designations infrastructure, science, education, and training. All of these areas would be met with potential partnerships Mt Moriah would form with other organizations. Some organizations that would benefit Mt Moriah are naturalists groups, bird watchers, historical societies, green space preservation groups, educational institutions with science classes, home schooling groups, the culture and arts department, and the Mural Arts program. Working with all
of these groups would centralize resources and enable the mission of both Mt Moriah and these
groups to be put into practice.

Conclusion

Mount Moriah Cemetery has had a tumultuous history of ups and downs. Established in
the mid-nineteenth century, Mount Moriah has touched the lives of thousands of individuals.
Throughout our summer in the Mayor’s Internship Program, we have kept in mind the needs of
Mount Moriah in order to promote a path of positive growth. In culmination, we assembled data
on over 150 burials, developed the first map of cemeteries in Philadelphia, and gauged
community interest in using the cemetery as a green space. With knowledge from the community
interest survey, we were able to effectively research and recommend programming opportunities
that would be appropriate for both individuals with a keen interest in Mount Moriah, as well as
the surrounding community. Lastly, we explored and evaluated grant opportunities that could
allow extraordinary change to be adopted in Mount Moriah. With support from the City of
Philadelphia, Mount Moriah Cemetery can be an asset to help strengthen community bonds and
revitalize the area.