

Bryn Athyn Historic District: The Complete Guide

By Marla Cimini



Located about 18 miles north of the city of Philadelphia in scenic Montgomery County, the [Bryn Athyn Historic District](#) is a unique destination that offers visitors a privileged glimpse into the area's fascinating religious history, with a focus on the exceptional architecture and design of several intriguing structures that were built over the course of many years.

Officially recognized as a National Historic Landmark in 2008, this noteworthy area is steeped in history and known for its incredible style of architecture and expansive gardens that were

envisioned and created by the town's religious early residents. History and design enthusiasts say there's truly nowhere else in the world that compares to these structures and illustrates these types of design styles together in one place.

History and Background

Bryn Athyn dates back to the early 1900s, when it was founded by the members of a religious Christian organization called "The General Church of New Jerusalem." The group moved their church from the middle of Old City in Philadelphia to the rural and secluded Huntington Valley to settle.

Bryn Athyn's original mansion, Cairnwood, was spearheaded by John Pitcairn, a member of the community's founding family and an industrialist who owned the lucrative Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. Later, his son Raymond oversaw the town's cathedral construction. Although he was not a trained architect, he was a student of medieval art and architecture, and successfully lead a team of more than 100 skilled artisans and builders (including woodcarvers, stonemasons, and metal workers) for about 40 years to design and construct this home.

In addition to Cairnwood and the impressive Bryn Athyn Cathedral, there are two family residences currently on the grounds: Cairncrest and Glencairn. Built between 1892 and 1938, these structures all showcase exceptional design and a blend of several architectural styles (often called the "Bryn Athyn style" by the architectural community). All of these buildings are unique and known for exceptional craftwork, along with the high quality of building materials used to create the structures.

Highlights of Bryn Athyn Historic District

Attracting visitors year-round, there are several intriguing guided tours available for visitors to learn about and enjoy the Bryn Athyn Historic District. The district is home to three main structures that are open to the public at specific times throughout the week. Each destination has its own website, so be sure to check the tour times in advance, as they are subject to change.

The Bryn Athyn Cathedral

Featuring gothic revival architecture, the construction of the immense [Bryn Athyn Cathedral](#) was supervised by John's son, Raymond. The work continued even after it was considered complete in 1919. This cathedral is a blend of several distinct architectural styles including Arts and Crafts, Romanesque Revival, and Art Nouveau. One of the most unique and significant details of this project is that the Pitcairns insisted that none of the components are repeated during the building. For example, there are over 100 doors in the cathedral and they all have different hinges and hardware.

It's also known to have recreated medieval glass windows and "intentional imperfections" in an effort to recreate the imperfect lines seen in authentic medieval glass windows. Visitors are also welcome to attend public services in the cathedral, but it is closed to the public during certain private events.

Cairnwood Estate

Considered a prime example of Gilded-Age architecture, [Cairnwood](#) is the only Beaux-Arts estate in Pennsylvania that was designed by Carrere and Hastings, a famous New York architectural firm. This country estate was originally the home of John and Gertrude Pitcairn and their six children. It features a multitude of expansive rooms, a chapel, and sprawling and well-manicured gardens.

This estate was donated to the Academy of the New Church in 1979. and opened for tours after some modifications were made. Don't miss the quaint Garden House and Tea Shop that's housed in a building that opened on the grounds in 1892. It was originally used as an area to relax in the midst of the family gardens. You can shop for unique herbal teas, interesting gifts and accessories. If you're visiting around the holidays, you're in luck. This estate also hosts special tours around Christmas. Cairnwood Estate is also available for weddings, parties and other events.

Glencairn Museum

Built during the Great Depression, [Glencairn Museum](#) is a massive stone castle that also showcases stellar architecture and has been referred to as a combination of Beaux-Arts and

medieval European styles. Between 1928 and 1939, this mansion was home to Raymond and Mildred Pitcairn and their family.

Today, it's a museum focused on religion and history and it's known as one of the most extensive collections of medieval art in the United States and features many exhibits with over 8,000 artifacts from across the world. This world-class collection includes mosaics, stone sculptures, and an array of paintings. The museum also has an observatory on the top floor, where visitors can see a picturesque view of the distant Philadelphia skyline.

How to Visit

There are several tour options available at the Bryn Athyn Historic District and each building has slightly different visiting hours. Visitors are urged to call in advance and make an appointment for a tour as the buildings are often used for private events and religious services.

The grounds and buildings are not accessible for those with limited walking ability. If you need assistance, call and request prior to your visit. There are some portable options that can be set up with advance notice.

How to Get There

The Bryn Athyn Historic District is located in Montgomery County, which is about 15 miles north of Philadelphia in a rural area. The easiest and fastest way to get to this unique destination is to drive from Philadelphia or take a taxi (or rideshare service). There is no public transportation directly to this area.