

Historic society launches app for self-guided tours of Pennsylvania's oldest graveyard

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Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church in Philadelphia is Pennsylvania's oldest surviving brick building. Its graveyard has remain in operation since it began receiving burials around 1677. (Photo courtesy of Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church)

[Gloria Dei \(Old Swedes'\) Episcopal Church](#) in Philadelphia's Queen Village neighborhood is both Pennsylvania's oldest surviving brick building and oldest church. Established in 1646 as a Swedish Lutheran church and built between 1698 and 1700, the church is [older](#) than the city of Philadelphia. Its graveyard, which is even older than the church building, has remained in operation since it began

receiving burials around 1677.

Amy Grant, chair of the nonprofit [Historic Gloria Dei Preservation Corporation](#) and an Old Swedes' parishioner, said in an interview that the remains of an estimated 5,000 people are interred at Old Swedes' graveyard, but only about 1,000 of them are on record. The oldest surviving headstone, belonging to [Peter and Andreas Sandel](#), dates to 1708.

"Every time I do research on somebody that I knew nothing about who's buried at Old Swedes', I learn something fascinating," Grant said. "There's an architect who preserved historic buildings and worked on a bank that was prominent during the Civil War, and the [first female journalist](#) for the *Philadelphia Daily News*. These are stories that can inspire future generations."

Grant, who's a full-time web developer and graphic designer, has been working with other board members of the preservation corporation—all volunteers—over the last five years supported by grants from the Queen Village Neighbors Association and the Philadelphia Cultural Fund to build an app for self-guided tours. The free app, called Old Swedes Graveyard Tours and developed by STQRY, a Rochester, New York-based software company, officially launched on October 4 and is available on iOS and Android.

The app features a searchable graveyard map with all the verified graves, including photos, and available biographies about the people who've been interred there, including [Alexander Wilson](#), the "Father of Ornithology," and Swedish composer [Erik W.G. Leidzén](#). The information also includes the headstones' inscriptions and epitaphs, and their sizes, materials, and conditions.

"The burial records from 1677 to 1750 disappeared at some point in time, so we don't have an exact number of people for those very early burials, and their gravestones have not necessarily survived," Grant said. "We do have evidence that point to such-and-such person was buried there because it was mentioned in their will, or someone has a letter that says where they were buried."

Old Swedes Graveyard Tours offers four different themed tours: a general tour, New Sweden history, the American Revolution, and mariners. Other specialized tours, including authors and actors, will later be available for a limited time in honor of National Author's Day in November and Philadelphia's [Mummers Parade](#) on New Year's Day. Audio tours with turn-by-turn directions will be available in the future.

“I think we have to preserve our history—both good and bad—so that we remember who came before us and why we’re here today,” said Grant, who also mentioned that there’s been a [growing interest](#) in people learning about their heritage through resources like Ancestry.com, Find A Grave, FamilySearch, and 23andMe.

“Access to genealogical materials has become very easy to obtain, and resources like the Old Swedes’ app makes that research easier,” she said.

Grant said it’s important to “preserve everything that we can,” because churches, like Old Swedes’, can’t always support everything on their own due to limited funds and needing to prioritize handling building maintenance and ministries.

“Once something’s gone, you can’t get it back,” Grant said. “If the church closes, the congregation leaves, no one will take care of the building. It’s going to wind up getting demolished, and I don’t want that to happen.” —Episcopal News Service