

Miracle in North Philadelphia

by Margaret Hope Bacon

On land once given to the Religious Society of Friends by George Fox sits the Fair Hill Burial Ground in North Philadelphia. Only a few years ago it appeared abandoned, a tangle of weeds, discarded tires, trash, and garbage, surrounded by a gap-toothed fence and gutted sidewalks, a menace to an already decaying neighborhood. On its northeast corner drug dealers gathered like flies, while their clients used the burial ground to shoot up. Neighborhood children were kept indoors to avoid the flying bullets of gang warfare.

Today, the burial ground has been returned to its former state of serenity and beauty, the drug dealers are gone, the sidewalks have been restored, and funds are being raised to replace the stolen sections of the fence. Neighbors and children from a nearby school work with Quaker volunteers from all over to plant flowers. Tourists can again visit the historic area with impunity. The United States Park Service has recently placed the burial ground on the National Register of Historic Places.

The change seems miraculous, and perhaps it is. But behind it lies the indomitable spirit of a woman who was buried here over 100 years ago. Lucretia Coffin Mott spent a long lifetime fighting for better conditions for blacks, women, Native Americans, and the working classes. When it was suggested in the 1980s that her grave be moved downtown to a better neighborhood, those tuned in to her spirit knew she would bristle at the mere idea. Instead, it seemed clear that she would want her admirers to do something about the Fair Hill neighborhood itself. And although it seemed like an effort doomed to failure, a small group met to consider what they could possibly do.

The first step was to buy back the burial ground, which had been sold to a local minister. Selling the burial ground

had seemed in the early 1980s the right action, as Friends had long since moved away from the neighborhood, and the minister was using the meetinghouse as a church. There had been a misunderstanding about the maintenance of the burial ground however, and it had begun to slide into decay. *LIFE Magazine* wrote an article about North Philadelphia in which it described the burial ground as a site for drug dealing, rape, and satanic rites, a menace to the neighborhood, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* picked up the story. A few neighbors decided to band together and come to Friends Center at 15th and Cherry Streets to ask if something could not be done. This initiative, coming at the same time as the ques-



tion of moving the Mott grave, galvanized the small group of interested Friends to action.

A Fair Hill Burial Ground Corporation was formed under Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting, made up of represen-



Photos courtesy of Mary Anne Hunter

tatives from all the meetings of the quarter, and funds were solicited from those meetings and various Quaker foundations to repurchase the burial ground. Negotiation with the owner resulted in the transfer of ownership back into Quaker hands in the spring of 1993.

Then began a cleanup process without precedent. Three times a year, in April, July, and October, Friends have gathered from far and near to help restore the burial ground. Some meetings choose one cleanup a year as a meeting event and bring many volunteers to help. Friends schools have also sent squadrons armed with rakes and shovels. A busload from New Garden Friends School in North Carolina put in a day of hard work. Swarthmore College has sent volunteers.

At first, volunteers picked up—with great care—buckets full of hypodermic needles. There were also dumpsters full of trash, including an abandoned and rusted car. Because the grave stones are small, neighbors had thought it was a pet cemetery and had contributed a few dead

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Before, during, and after: Volunteers transform the Fairhill Burial Ground from a tangled jungle to an orderly resting place.

dogs and cats to the trash piles. Weeds and weed trees had grown up and had to be cut down; existing trees were pruned. While volunteers worked on one side of the fence, the drug dealers still plied their trade on the other. Sometimes shots rang out, and the volunteers wondered if they were risking their lives.

But slowly, the miracle began to happen. Former drug addicts in a local recovery program were engaged to keep the trash down from week to week. A teacher from the Julia de Burgos Middle School became interested and brought a class working on environmental issues to help with the cleanup and planting. Later they decided to plant a tree farm and to act out a play in which James and Lucretia Mott come back from heaven to confront the president and demand an end to the drug trade. The Philadelphia district attorney became one of the volunteers. The Mural Arts Program painted a neighboring wall with a picture of Mott and of others who had participated in the antislavery campaign, as well as Barbara Moffett of the AFSC who published Martin Luther King's Let-



ter from a Birmingham Jail.

Neighbors were consulted in the planning of the restoration. While they would like to see the day when the neighborhood can use the gardens for special events,

their primary concern was that the Fair Hill Burial Ground be restored to its former state of beauty. Meanwhile a group of neighbors took heart and organized a garden and playground for the children on nearby Hutchinson Street. The miracle was made up of a number of small acts of courage and devotion, by those determined to see what love can do.

While the spirit of Lucretia Mott has been the guiding force in the restoration of the Burial Ground, there have been many others to inspire the volunteers, going back over 300 years. William Penn himself gave George Fox the land in the "liberties" where Fair Hill Burial Ground now sits. Isaac Norris went to the meeting that once was held there. Revolutionary soldiers were cared for in the meetinghouse, long since torn down, to the south of the burial ground.

In 1843, when the present burial ground was laid out to accommodate the Hicksite meetings in the city, many Friends were concerned to rid the nation of slavery. The radicals among them formed a network around James and Lucretia Mott, who were friends and colleagues of William Lloyd Garrison. James Mott was also a chief fundraiser for the new burial ground. As a result some members of the Garrisonian Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society were buried at Fair Hill cemetery. Among them are Sarah Pugh and Abigail Kimber, school teachers who accompanied Lucretia Mott to London to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. Excluded because of their gender, they supported Lucretia Mott and the young wife of a delegate, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, when they agreed to return to the United States to work for women's rights.

Other activists buried at Fair Hill include Edward M. Davis, the Motts' son-in-law, who gave his farm for the training of the first all-black U. S. army regiment, and Robert Purvis, an African American who founded the first underground railroad in the Philadelphia area. Not a Friend, though a friend of Friends, Purvis was married first to Harriet Forten, daughter of the famous James Forten, sailmaker. He probably bought a family lot at Fair Hill because of his friendship with the Morts. Harriet was also an activist, serving with the interracial Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. She along with a



Photos courtesy of Mary Anne Hunter

Badland's Blues

by Signe Wilkinson

Community, Stewardship, Pe
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Quakers don't have a clue what living in the city of brotherly love's most dangerous zip code is like. Thirty some murders a year. Gunfire every night. Drugs everywhere. While working on the Fair Hill Burial Ground has brought many satisfactions over the years, it has also brought realizations about how little Friends culture has to say to residents of our violent inner-cities. In particular it makes one rethink calcified views about peace, public safety, and police.

At our project, we have had our brushes with the gun-laden society of the surrounding streets, which are nicknamed "the badlands." A bus that had carried Guilford College volunteers was broken into, thieves have stolen many sections of our historic fence, and at one of our clean-ups a Penn Charter School teacher dressed up as William Penn had to break off his historic monologue as everyone dove for cover when a nearby drug deal gone bad erupted into a car chase and gunfire. Of course, the black and Hispanic residents of the blocks surrounding the burial ground suffer similar acts of random unkindness every day.

Instead of imagining what life amidst such violence might be like, we pretend to know. We manage, as a

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result, to miss the point. This dawned on me at one of our clean-ups when, with drug dealers lining the outside fence, a well-intentioned Quaker volunteer from the suburbs came up to a Philadelphia City councilman who was working with us for the morning and thanked him for his vote in support of a civilian review board of oversight for the Philadelphia police.

What a suburban Quaker wanted was a civilian review board. What our Fair Hill neighbors had actually wanted was the National Guard.

If society wasn't going to give them police or military protection, several neighbors suggested that we just give them the weapons and they could take out the "bad guys." As to what we could do to make our own property safer, neighbors' suggestions ranged from electrifying the fence to building guard towers on the corners and manning them with submachine guns. While they wanted respect from the police and if asked wouldn't be opposed to a civilian review board, mostly they wanted more *policing* from the police. They weren't getting it. A police review board was a nice luxury but it certainly wasn't going to do anything to stem the tide of violence. After the review board was passed, the violence continued to escalate.

Essentially, society had said to this neighborhood that the residents were so unimportant that they didn't deserve the most basic service governments are organized to provide: public safety. Quakers had long since abandoned Fair Hill but so

had Quakerism. Our cheerful platitudes about peace meant nothing at the corner of Ninth and Indiana. Or, perhaps they might have, but no one from any Quaker organization was out standing among the well-armed young men on that desperate stretch telling the dealers that peace was the way.

Finally, someone did intervene. Last fall, the Philadelphia police, under the supervision of a new chief from New York City, set up an intermittent roadblock on the northeast corner of our burial ground. The consistent presence of civilization has cut the violence and given the neighbors respite from the pushers who, until recently, lined the entire north side of the burial ground fence. While the police continue making arrests, their simple presence has wrecked the open-air drug market that had flourished on the site. The number of dealers selling such fine concoctions as "Holocaust" a hundred yards from Lucretia Mott's grave has dwindled. Some go elsewhere, but in other cities that have tried similar tactics, there is an overall decrease in dealers. Police have also gotten to know and work with the neighbors they once just cruised by.

Unless we decide to support the decriminalization of drugs (preferably starting in a neighborhood where Quakers actually live), Friends need to reconsider what has become a knee-jerk rejection of police. In this instance, they *are* the peace-keepers. The police aren't looking only to make arrests, they are looking to decrease

Left: Students from Julia de Burgos Middle School perform a play imagining James and Lucretia Mott's return to the neighborhood.

daughter and a daughter-in-law as well as Robert Purvis's mother are buried at Fair Hill. They are one of very few African American families to be buried in a Quaker burial ground during the 19th century.

Thomas and Mary Ann McClintock, active in antislavery, began their work in Philadelphia, moved to Waterloo, New York, and returned to Philadelphia in later

crime by their very presence. As the murder rate goes down (and it has by half in New York City), the number of victims goes down and so too does the number of murderers. That means fewer people in jail and on death row. It also means that children can get to school more safely and perhaps have a shot at surviving childhood. The same effect might well have been achieved by a round-the-clock presence of concerned Friends walking the streets. But we weren't there.

When our little band of volunteers first started to clean up the burial ground, we did a survey of what neighbors wanted. Top on every list was getting rid of drug dealers. A strong second was cleaning up the neighborhood. A variety of special programs were a distant third. We Quakers have succeeded in cleaning up our four-and-a-half acres. We knew we wouldn't be able to do it alone and we were right. We have worked productively with neighborhood ministers, residents, recovering drug addicts, and educators. But if we are to be honest, we should recognize that our efforts will succeed only if Fair Hill becomes a safe neighborhood where people earning their living from something other than drugs want to live. For that, we will have to be more open and flexible in our thinking about police and who we need to work with to give peace a chance. □

years. While at Waterloo, Mary Ann McClintock was one of five women present at the famous tea party where the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 for Woman's Rights was organized, and the next day she hosted a second meeting at her house where the Declaration of Women's Rights was written.

Both James Mott and Robert Purvis were also members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. So was Henry Laing, who served as treasurer for that organization for many years. A school established for former slaves near Charleston, South Carolina, was named for him. Daniel Neall, also an Abolition Society member, was chair of the group that built Pennsylvania Hall in 1838 as a gathering place for abolitionists, only to see it burned down by an angry proslavery mob. Anna Jeanes kept the liberal tradition alive by funding schools for freedmen and founding the Jeanes Fund to help rural black schools in the South enrich their curriculum.

The burial ground also has many ties to Quaker schools and colleges. Edward Parrish, first president of Swarthmore College, is buried at Fair Hill. So is Anna Mott Hopper, Lucretia Mott's daughter and a member of Swarthmore's board of managers. Altogether, 11 members of the early corporation, 4 teachers, and 21 students

from the early years joined Edward Parrish at Fair Hill. Friends Aaron B. Ivins, principal of Friends Central School 1855-1883; and Lydia Gillingham, principal of the girl's department 1853-1875, are among faculty buried there.

These voices from the past are joined by the many men and women, boys and girls of the present who have given time, energy, and resources to bring the burial ground back to a state of beauty and serenity that makes it an asset, rather than a deficit, to the people of the neighborhood. Some day, a neighbor predicted, it will be like the Betsy Ross house, an attraction bringing tourists and resources to the neighborhood.

Lucretia Mott might scoff at being compared to Betsy Ross. But she would be pleased that her presence is making a positive difference in a neighborhood's redevelopment. And she would not consider the change a miracle. Hadn't she started with a mere handful to launch the antislavery movement? With four other women to launch the woman's rights movement? "Though they [the reformers] may be few in number and weak in force," she once said at Race Street Meeting, quoting First Corinthians "it may be said again, 'I have chosen the weak things to confound the strong and the wise.'" Faith like that can move mountains. □

A celebration to mark the placement of the Fair Hill Burial Ground on the National Register of Historic Places of the U.S. Park Service will be held on Saturday, April 10, at 11 a.m. at the burial ground.

Present will be city officials, council members, representatives of the National Park Service, of Pennsylvania NOW, Women's Way, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Women's Community Revitalization Project, Awbury Arboretum, local civic associations, neighbors, members of many Friends meetings, and descendants of those buried at Fair Hill, especially of Lucretia Mott and Mary Ann McClintock, two pioneers of the women's rights movement of the 19th century.

The burial ground won its place on the National Register because of its antiquity and because of the large number of reformers buried there.

