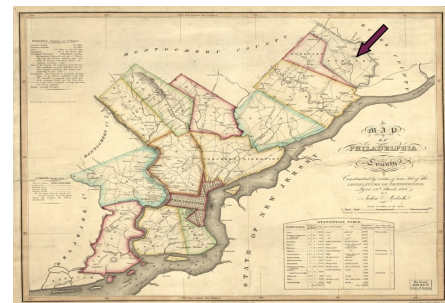


# A QUAKER "RENAISSANCE" IN NORTHEAST PHILADELPHIA

## by Mary Ellen McNish (Byberry Friends Meeting)

My good friend and neighbor Greg Barnes asked me to write a short piece about the efforts to revitalize one of the oldest Monthly Meetings in PYM, Byberry Friends Meeting. Located in what is referred to as the "Far Northeast" section of Philadelphia. It is a 5-acre oasis of mostly open space in a densely populated section of the city.



After 30 years of service to other Friends organizations, e.g., Friends General Conference and the American Friends Service Committee, I am finally able to spend time, talent and treasure at my own Monthly Meeting and currently serve as the President of the Trustees of Byberry.

Although within the city limits of Philadelphia, Byberry is a member of the Abington Quarterly Meeting (not Philadelphia Quarter). As the story has been told for many generations, during the Meeting's early period, commerce of the region followed early trading routes, which led Byberry Friends to interact with merchants and farmers in Montgomery County rather than Philadelphia itself or Bucks County, which is only a couple of city blocks away.



Byberry was founded in 1683 by four Walton brothers from Bibury England, who immigrated to the region at the same time as William Penn. Since that time, it has played a critical and historic role in many social change movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and to a lesser extent in the ensuing

years. Of note to Quakers was Byberry's significant role in the Orthodox/Hicksite split in 1827 as John Comley, then Clerk of Byberry was also Clerk of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and was one of the leaders of the Hicksite separation.



The current (third) Meetinghouse built in 1814, had witnessed extraordinary testimony during the lead-up to the Civil War, and the abolition of slavery. When messages about slavery from such "weighty" visiting Friends as Lucretia and James Mott occurred in Meeting for Worship, Friends at Byberry and some other local abolitionists decided to build a debate hall where the abolition of slavery could be discussed in a more

temporal setting. To that end, Harriet (Forten) Purvis, and her husband Robert Purvis (pictured here along side Lucretia Mott), free and wealthy African Americans, (whose property surrounded the Meetinghouse), pledged, and financed the building of Byberry Hall. It is one of the four historically significant structures remaining on Byberry's property.

Byberry Hall is the only purpose-built abolition debate hall remaining in the city of Philadelphia, and one of only 3 left in PYM itself... but most notably, it is the only one built by African Americans.



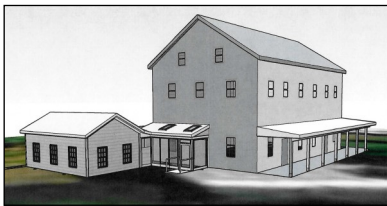


Once erected, Byberry Hall became a rural center to host abolitionists from throughout the country, including William Lloyd Garrison, James and Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglas, and others — and Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were regular guests of the Purvis family, as the two struggles (anti-slavery and women’s rights) became intertwined in the rural Byberry community and beyond.

The Meetinghouse itself remains unchanged since 1810, except for the removal of the wood stove and the introduction of central heat and electricity for lighting. Nothing else changed and we still have the original outhouses ensconced within our walls. We have no running water and find it difficult to offer hospitality after Meeting or at other times during events.



In 2018, after the loss of some very weighty members, Byberry Friends, held a retreat to face the major decision to either lay down the Meeting or invest capital and resources into reinvigorating the “life of the Meeting”. Most remaining members felt that there is tremendous potential for reaching the densely populated neighborhoods in Northeast Philadelphia, and for being a spiritual respite amongst the noise of one of our country’s largest cities. The congregation at Byberry is now lean, at 19 members, but is committed to moving forward, growing our congregation’s size, and offering a spiritual home for those seeking God’s Truth.



The first objective of the plan was the construction of an addition to provide the necessary comforts of restrooms and a kitchen for hospitality. We expect to break ground imminently. Our 10- year goal is to expand the reach of Byberry Friends Meeting to those in the area who seek a religious home, with direct access to the Divine; and where peace, social justice, and simplicity are central to their daily lives and grounding for their moral compass. A major overhaul of the administration of the operations of the Byberry Meeting Complex will enable Friends to direct more attention to In-reach and Outreach efforts by facilitating communications, sharing insights, and becoming active and relevant in wider social change efforts.

We have adopted a slightly different approach than most Meetings to accomplishing our strategic goals. We hired a Consultant, Susan Vorwerk, a member of Upper Dublin Meeting and a descendent of Daniel Walton, (one of Byberry’s founding brothers). With Susan’s help we have assessed the requirements for change, assembled the technology to create a stable infrastructure and grown our capacity to “spread the word”.

We have developed partnerships with Upper Dublin Monthly Meeting, and local and regional entities, using this groundwork to be the platform for reaching a wider circle as our Meeting continues to grow. As a Board Member of the “Peace Walk” (Philadelphia Interfaith Walk for Peace & Reconciliation), one of our objectives is to host a walk in the near future.



We certainly hope this “taste of Byberry” will inspire you to: [visit our website](#) ; follow and “like” us on social media, ([Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#)), and better yet, join us in Zoom (Tues and Thurs PM and Sunday AM) for worship. Just email us at [ByberryQuakers@gmail.com](mailto:ByberryQuakers@gmail.com) to get the Zoom Meeting Room details.