



Friends Place on Capitol Hill

Promoting Civic Engagement

Carl Abbott



Friends Place on Capitol Hill

PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

By Carl Abbott

First edition, September 2021

Published by the FCNL Education Fund and Friends Place on Capitol Hill



245 Second Street NE
Washington, DC 20002
800-630-1330
www.fcnl.org



515 East Capitol Street SE
Washington, DC 20003
(202) 543-5560
www.friendsplacedc.org

Diane Randall, **General Secretary**

Adlai Amor, Alicia McBride, Diane Randall, and Eric Bond, **editors**
Wesley Wolfbear Pinkham, **designer**



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

ISBN 978-1-7326243-9-9



Printed using vegetable inks on FSC-certified paper in a facility that uses renewable energy.

Photos by Eric Bond: Front and back cover and pages 1, 4, 8, 12.

All remaining photographs are from FCNL and William Penn House archives.

Table of Contents

Foreword: Affirming Our Commitment to Quaker Advocacy..... 1

Promoting Civic Engagement 3

Quakers Come to Capitol Hill..... 5

SIDEBAR: THE HOUSE 6

William Penn House in Action 8

SIDEBAR: THE NEIGHBORHOOD 10

New Beginnings..... 12

SIDEBAR: GREENING FRIENDS PLACE..... 14

References 15

About the Author 17



Affirming Our Commitment to Quaker Civic Engagement



Amid the political partisanship and rapid social change in our country, we see that an engaged citizenry is essential to ensuring that our democracy becomes more equitable and thus, stronger. Through Friends Place on Capitol Hill, we affirm the critical role of all people—especially young people—in fostering the dynamic engagement demanded of democracy.

As a Quaker witness on Capitol Hill, Friends Place is steeped in the history of its predecessor, William Penn House. Since 1966, it has opened its doors to host people participating in events like the Vietnam War protests, the Poor People’s Campaign, the Anti-Nuclear Movement, Occupy Wallstreet, and the Sunrise Movement. The beloved house also provided hospitality to scores of groups visiting Congress to lobby their lawmakers.

Carl Abbott’s *Friends Place on Capitol Hill: Promoting Civic Engagement*, provides an overview of this unique Quaker learning center and guesthouse and its role as social movements led by young people thrive and drive change.

Friends Place is committed to hospitality and civic engagement that fosters people participation towards a more just, peaceful, equitable, and sustainable planet. Through its close connection with the Friends Committee on National Legislation and the proximity to the U.S. Capitol, Friends Place is well positioned to continue its historic purpose as it responds to today’s challenges.

Our country and our world need the activism and dedication of people committed to lifting every voice, recognizing the humanity of every person, and laboring together to create the beloved community for all.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Diane".

Diane R. Randall

General Secretary, Friends Committee on National Legislation

PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

With the reopening of Friends Place on Capitol Hill, the Friends Committee on National Legislation Education Fund (FCNL EdFund) is writing a new chapter of Quaker advocacy with an old partner. Friends Place is a learning center and guesthouse that has advanced peace, justice, and environmental stewardship for more than half a century.

From 2019 through 2021, FCNL EdFund repaired and revitalized this Quaker space to welcome young adults and activists to Capitol Hill for civic engagement programs to strengthen democracy.



From the roof of Friends Place, pictured with the ornamental *finial* in the foreground, you can see your proximity to the U.S. Capitol and Washington Monument. Photo by Eric Bond/FCNL.

Friends Place occupies a building on East Capitol Street that has been integral to the Quaker presence in Washington, D.C., since 1966, hosting meetings and conferences and providing accommodations for visiting Friends, activists, and school and college groups. In 2019, FCNL assumed governance and management of the building, spending more than \$1.8 million to upgrade and refurbish the century-old building.

At that time, discussions began about a more appropriate name. Until 2021, the building and its programs were known as William Penn House, invoking the name of one of the nation's most prominent Quaker figures, one who is recognized for his promotion of freedom of conscience in the colony of Pennsylvania.

Since 1966, however, historians have come to understand that 17th century Quakers did not always see a contradiction between freedom of conscience and individual unfreedom. They have brought to light a troubled history. William Penn may have founded Pennsylvania to promote religious liberty, but he was also an enslaver. At his estate along the Delaware River, he controlled the lives of at least a dozen individuals whom he knew by slave names—Sam, Sue, Yaff, Jack, Parthenia, and others. He also failed to follow through on his intention to free these individuals after his death.

After a period of research and discernment, the board agreed in February 2021 to rename the building Friends Place on Capitol Hill. Renaming this special place, in the words of Diane Randall, FCNL general secretary, is a “reckoning with our country’s history, our religious society’s history, and our personal histories.”

The name Friends Place on Capitol Hill conveys the sense of inclusiveness and community that the building and its programs promise to offer.

Quakers Come to Capitol Hill

In the early 1960s, Friends Committee on National Legislation had a problem, and the building that became William Penn House was the solution.

Two generations ago, a pair of real estate decisions fixed a Quaker presence on Capitol Hill. Founded in 1943 to advocate for peace during a time of war, FCNL operated from temporary offices until 1957, when Friends Meeting of Washington purchased a Civil War-era house at 245 2nd Street NE and jury-rigged it for offices.

In the early 1960s, FCNL leaders realized that its one building was inadequate for all its needs. The divisions and conflicts that were stressing the nation brought frequent tumult to Washington, D.C. Year after year, massive demonstrations attracted tens and hundreds of thousands of people to fill the National Mall:

- **March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom**
August 28, 1963
- **Poor People's Campaign/ Resurrection City**
May-June 1968
- **March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam**
April 17, 1965
- **National Moratorium Against the War March**
November 15, 1969
- **March on the Pentagon**
October 21, 1967



The House

Friends Place stands out among its older neighbors. East Capitol Street was well built up by the start of the 20th century with small wooden houses (like the Friends Place neighbor to the west) and sets of two- and three-story row houses (like its neighbors to the east.)

In 1917, it replaced a two-story frame building that was probably a twin to the adjacent frame house.

The new house, built for businessman Joseph Herbert, was more imposing than other buildings on the block with its fourth floor, wide first floor window, and upper level bay windows with embossed copper ornamentation that

took advantage of a city ordinance intended to allow fancier buildings.

The house was a family investment in a neighborhood that had been comfortable but never trendy, serving a mix of small business owners, civil servants, and skilled craftsmen who worked at the Washington Navy Yard.

Prior to its purchase by Friends Meeting of Washington, the building's first floor housed the offices of attorneys, insurance agents, and real estate firms. In the early 1960s it was also temporary housing for a group of nuns who had been displaced from their normal residence.

Friends from around the country joined these protests. Others came to Washington to lobby Congress in support of civil rights for all Americans and against war in Vietnam—sometimes on their own and sometimes with guidance from FCNL. The small organization was being stretched to the limit. Its small staff found it increasingly difficult to arrange seminars and speakers, organize lobbying appointments, and help with housing and meals. Its building at the corner of 2nd and C Street NE proved inadequate for hosting meetings and seminars, much less providing housing for Quakers who wanted to make their presence felt in the capital.

Working with FCNL, the Friends Meeting of Washington formed a committee in 1964 to find a property on Capitol Hill to provide lodging and seminars for Quaker activists. Ed Snyder, then FCNL executive secretary, and Raymond Wilson, his predecessor, were the catalysts. Snyder had previously worked for Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in New York, whose work benefitted greatly from partnering with Quaker House, a conference and retreat center close to the UN. He envisioned a similar partnership in Washington. Consulting and brainstorming in 1964, this small visionary group developed plans for a facility in Washington that could partner with FCNL and meet needs that the FCNL office building could not.

The idea took off. Friends Meeting of Washington purchased a house at 515 E. Capitol Street SE and opened its doors in September 1966 as a Quaker seminar and hospitality center. Bob and Sally Cory, who also had Quaker UN Office connections, were the first co-directors of William Penn House. They had close ties to FCNL and worked with FCNL while developing programs for the newly acquired building.

William Penn House in Action

William Penn House faced special challenges when it was only two years old. The spring of 1968 was a tense time in Washington. The five-day insurrection that followed the April 4 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. devastated neighborhoods to the north of Capitol Hill. Marines mounted machine guns on the steps of the Capitol and incidents of property damage occurred within two blocks of the building.

The next month, thousands of protesters converged on Washington for the Poor People's Campaign of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and building the Resurrection City encampment on the National Mall from May 21 to June 24, 1968.

Penn House staff worked hard to support the Poor People's Campaign. It offered temporary housing for advance organizers to work on plans for Resurrection City. It supplied thousands of meals, showers, and laundry facilities as well as meeting rooms and typewriters. Campaign leaders met with Congressional staffers in its seminar room. When Resurrection City residents were violently evicted, it housed folks trying to figure out how to get home and others after their release from jail. It was a rainy spring in Washington, and the amount of mud tracked through its halls showed its service to people from soggy Resurrection City.

Ed Snyder later recalled that FCNL's relationship with William Penn House was initially close since it immediately took up the educational role FCNL had been struggling to perform. FCNL's lobbying role could expand, but the essential educational work continued, with FCNL in an advisory and resource role.



Ed Snyder, executive secretary of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, meets with a group of travelers from the University of Denver in 1984.

“Over the years, William Penn House has made a major contribution to the Quaker presence in the nation’s capital,” he wrote in 1994.

Over more than five decades, uncounted thousands of people have visited the building on East Capital Street for its seminars and programs or have spent a night, a weekend, or a week.

In one typically busy year (2011), the house hosted 61 groups and a total of 7,280 guests, which the director thought was low because of bad winter weather. Multiply by 55 years since 1966, and we can project as many as 100,000 individuals staying for a total of 400,000 nights. Some have been Quakers attending FCNL meetings and Quaker Lobby Day, and others have been individuals looking for an affordable place to stay while visiting museums or working at the Library of Congress.



The Neighborhood

Similar to steps to support Quaker witness to the national government, acquisition of the FCNL building and what is now Friends Place happened through logical and important steps. They were also acts of faith in the future of the Capitol Hill neighborhood, the first historic district in the country. A stable middle-class neighborhood in the early 20th century, Capitol Hill experienced disinvestment and abandonment in the two decades after World War II.

Freeway construction and the expansion of federal offices removed block after block of housing. Suburbanization and white flight reduced demand for properties. In 1960, residents of the census tract that included 515 E. Capitol were substantially poorer than most Washingtonians and averaged considerably fewer years of schooling. Many in the D.C. area would have considered it unsafe.

At the same time, the Quaker investments came early on to counter the trend. A Capitol Hill Restoration Society appeared in 1955, aiming to preserve the historic architecture. A few prominent Washingtonians, such as Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, opted to live on Capitol Hill rather than in fashionable Northwest Washington.

Historic preservation activists placed the neighborhood on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. For residents at the time, this revival was a mixed blessing involving gentrification before the term was known. An increasingly upscale neighborhood was a plus in attracting individuals and school groups to the Quaker learning center and guesthouse.

The majority have come as members of Quaker and of non-Quaker groups, ranging from Girl Scouts to Veterans for Peace. Some colleges and Quaker schools sent groups year after year—including University of Denver, Concord University, University of Washington, George School, Scattergood Friends School, and Carolina Friends School. In a recent year, there were students from a Catholic high school in Kentucky, college groups from North Carolina and Tennessee, and middle school Quakers from New England.

There were also challenges in adapting a single-family house to provide group accommodations. Anyone who has owned an older house can be sympathetic to upgrading outmoded wiring and plumbing, replacing the roof, coping with leaks and falling plaster, and complying with building and zoning codes.

William Penn House had to get along with neighbors who didn't immediately welcome a bunch of radicals to their block (*Are they Communists?* residents wondered) and have not always appreciated the many comings and goings.

City officials decided that it looked more like a boarding house than a religious institution. To find the money to keep the facility going, its managers increasingly provided accommodations to individuals and groups not associated

Students from Oakwood School visit the office of Rep. Hamilton Fish (NY-21) in 1986. Visitors to William Penn House often participated in a whirlwind of civic engagements.





Bob and Sally Cory, who also had Quaker UN Office connections, were the first co-directors of William Penn House. They are pictured here planting a tree at the William Penn House 20th anniversary.

with FCNL and took on a service mission. For example, the Washington Quaker Workcamps program for high school students, which dated to the mid-1980s, merged with William Penn House in the early 2000s because the goals and values of the two organizations were complementary.

Over the years, William Penn House continued to serve FCNL by providing housing for members of its committees and other visitors, room for committee meetings, and even a site for parties. FCNL staff often spoke to school groups about the Quaker approach to lobbying. At the same time, leaders and staff struggled to define a distinct mission. There was little coordinated programming with FCNL or with other major Quaker organizations after the first years as each organization grew in its own direction. Joe Volk, who was FCNL's executive secretary from 1990 to 2011, recalls friendly relations, but not much of a working relationship.

New Beginnings

After more than a quarter century under the wing of Friends Meeting of Washington, William Penn House incorporated as


an independent nonprofit corporation in 1993 and received title to its building in 1998. As a nonprofit, it continued to receive broad support from individual Quakers, monthly meetings, and yearly meetings.

In 2019, William Penn House entered a new phase of service to the Quaker community. After careful discernment, its board transferred oversight, programming, and fiscal management to FCNL Education Fund. What is now known to the public as Friends Place on Capitol Hill remains a separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit, but with a board elected by the FCNL Ed Fund.

The change reinvigorates the relationship that had been envisioned in the 1960s. In its early days, wrote Raymond Wilson, it had been “the focal point for nearly a hundred meetings a year, many of them in cooperation with the FCNL. Luncheons were held for Congressional staff on a variety of questions but often centering on Vietnam. Seminars were arranged for Quaker pastors and other leaders [and] high school and college students. The house also served as a meeting place for many strategy sessions of nongovernmental organizations with headquarters in Washington.”

Fast-forward 50-plus years and Friends Place again sees programs and hospitality at 515 East Capitol Street as a way to invite more people to deeper advocacy for peace, justice, and an earth restored. Its programs have been reoriented to answer the needs for civic engagement by young people as prompted by recent partisan divisiveness, racial reckoning, the climate crisis, and systemic inequities that challenge U.S. democracy.

The rich shared history of the FCNL Education Fund and the former William Penn House will continue as each organization enters this new relationship.



Greening Friends Place

The Friends Place greets visitors with the dusky green of weathered copper around its bay windows and the verdant green of a front Peace Garden. The Peace Garden, a backyard rain garden, and a living roof on the rear carriage house were all added between 2006 and 2013, reflecting volunteer enthusiasm, the availability of small grants, and the increasing focus of Friends on environmental stewardship. The gardens have even been a feature on annual Capitol Hill House and Garden Tours.

From 2019-2021, coinciding with the Covid-19 pandemic, the building was closed for major repairs and upgrades. The architectural firm chosen for the project, Burt Hill Kosar Rittleman Associates, is the same firm that rebuilt FCNL's headquarters and the Quaker Welcome Center.

In upgrading Friends Place, they incorporated many of the green building principles

in the two other Quaker buildings on Capitol Hill—the Quaker Welcome Center and FCNL headquarters.

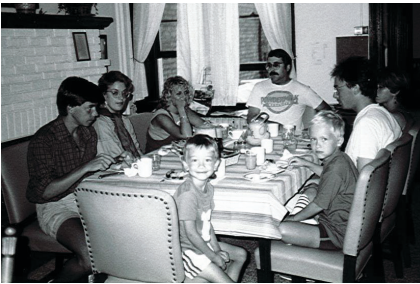
The \$2 million upgrade included the installation of a green wall facing the back garden—watered by storm water—and permeable paving stones to eliminate standing water in the back patio.

The architects added an electric chair lift to make the first floor ADA compliant. An emergency exit leading to the back alley was also built through the carriage house whose living roof has been retained.

Inside Friends Place, energy-efficient lighting and appliances are now in use, as well as energy-efficient floor tiles. Most of the old wooden floors in the building were replaced with durable, long-lasting vinyl tiles. Throughout the repairs, Friends House remained committed to Quaker principles of simplicity and environmental stewardship.

REFERENCES

- Abbott, M., and Abbott, C. (2008). *Redefining Quaker Simplicity: The Friends Committee on National Legislation Building*, 2005. *Quaker Studies*, 12(2), 230-252.
- Caughey, George. (2020). *Notes on Washington, D.C.'s William Penn House*. Unpublished
- *The Poor People's Campaign: A Preliminary Report on the role of William Penn House*. William Penn House News. (Washington, DC, July 2, 1968).
- Snyder, Edward F. *Witness in Washington: Fifty Years of Friendly Persuasion* (Richmond, IN, Friends United Press, 1995).
- Wilson, E. Raymond. *Uphill for Peace* (Richmond, IN, Friends United Meeting, 1975).



For years, Friends Place has been a place to break bread and meet new friends.



The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) Education Fund promotes civic engagement to achieve a peaceful, just, and sustainable world. It works closely with the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), which lobbies Congress, and Friends Place on Capitol Hill, a Quaker guesthouse and learning center that advances civic engagement for young people.

All three are nonpartisan and nonprofit Quaker organizations working collectively to advance peace, justice, and environmental stewardship.

To learn how to lobby, visit fcnl.org/virtuallobbying

To support FCNL, visit fcnl.org/donate



Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

As Friends Place bears witness and promotes civic engagement, it also acknowledges the Nacotchtank tribe on whose ancestral land the Friends Place on Capitol Hill building stands. They are also known as the Anacostans, the Indigenous people who lived along the banks of the Anacostia River, including in several villages in what is now known as Capitol Hill and Washington, D.C. By the 1700s, the Nacotchtank tribe had merged with other tribes like the Pamunkey and the Piscataway, both of which still exist today.

Carl Abbott

Carl Abbott is a member of Multnomah Meeting in Portland, Oregon. He joined the Society of Friends at the 57th Street Meeting in Chicago in 1969—after growing up in a mildly progressive United Methodist church but finding that Quaker worship spoke directly to his spirit. He has filled many different roles in his home meeting and in the North Pacific Yearly Meeting, and he has worshipped with Friends in seven countries.



Photo by Kate Holt/FCNL

He is a historian and city planning specialist who taught urban studies and planning at Portland State University in five decades—but not fifty years! He has also filled endowed professorships at the George Washington University and the University of Oregon.

He has published several books on the history of cities, city planning, and the social context of science fiction. His books include *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C., from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), *How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America* (University of New Mexico Press, 2008), and *Frontiers Past and Future: Science Fiction and the American West* (University Press of Kansas, 2006).

His most recent books are *Imagining Urban Futures: Cities in Science Fiction and What We Might Learn from Them* (Wesleyan University Press, 2016), also available in Chinese; *City Planning: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2020); and *Quakers: A Quick Guide* (Friends Committee on National Legislation, 2020). With his wife Margery Post Abbott, he has written *Quakerism: The Basics* (Routledge, 2021). He also contributes to such publications as CityLab, Los Angeles Review of Books, Public Books, and the Washington Post.



FCNL
Education Fund



Friends Place
on Capitol Hill