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Revitalizing an ancient burial  
ground helps bring a North  
Philadelphia neighborhood  
back from the brink.

# *Resurrecting Fairhill*

*by* MICHELE W. BERGER  
*photographs by* ROB CARDILLO



Neighborhood volunteers such as Amir Elliott (left) maintain the History Garden (right). Briana Barton (below, right) instructs another volunteer (below, left) on planting basics.



*“Kids pick raspberries, climb trees, and get excited about red-tailed hawks and watering tomato plants and eating strange things they never knew about.”*

—Briana Barton, garden manager

On a warm Saturday in August 2016, a half dozen community members pull weeds and harvest produce from one of two main gardens at Historic Fair Hill, a North Philadelphia cemetery best known as the final resting place for abolitionists and early women’s rights activists like Lucretia Mott. At the start of the midday lunch break, garden manager Briana Barton—barefoot, with a long braid of brown hair resting over one shoulder—places shallow black crates full of the morning’s bounty at either end of a green picnic table.

The conversation flows easily; this small group gathers here regularly during the growing season. Barton adds some just-picked Swiss chard to her sandwich and asks 17-year-old Amir Elliott how the figs have been coming along. “A lot are becoming ripe, like we talked about,” he says with a shy smile. “Next week we should have a bunch of figs.”

Beyond any fresh food that’s grown here, and the cemetery’s ancient, storied past, the site is now recognized for playing an important role in the revival of a neighborhood that hit bottom 30 years ago. “These gardens are transformative,” says Jean Warrington, Historic Fair Hill’s executive director. “They’re not just about vegetables. These grounds have become a real oasis of peace and beauty and health in the Fairhill neighborhood, which is still struggling.”



These kids experience nature in their own neighborhood. Youth group members such as Cilah Reid (right) help tend the gardens established by Jean Warrington (bottom) and other community leaders.



*“The most important thing the garden is doing is bringing people together.”*

—Jean Warrington, HFH executive director



**BADLANDS MADE BETTER**

After his death in 1691, the English Quaker George Fox bequeathed the 4½ acres that became Historic Fair Hill to American Quakers for the site of a meetinghouse and “burying place.” The cemetery and two different meetinghouses (in 1887 a new structure replaced the original one) served the community from 1703 into the 1960s, but by 1985, Quaker meeting attendance had dwindled to the point that the decision was made to sell the land and building to a local church. The new owners promised to maintain the burial ground but did not, and after a few years, with the property overgrown and filled with trash, drug dealers moved in, hiding their wares and guns among 10-foot-high weeds.

Bounded by Germantown and Indiana avenues and Ninth and Cambria streets, the Fairhill burial ground sits in an area once known as “the Badlands—the biggest open-air crack market in Philadelphia,” Warrington says. By the early 1990s, community residents began organizing and reaching out—to other local Quakers and to the police—for help with cleaning up both the



Neighbors working together for a healthier future



A neighborhood that was once plagued by crime and blight is recovering thanks to the combined efforts of many groups and individuals. Tom Grabe (1) is part of the core group of volunteers. Students from nearby schools (2, 3, 6) pitch in by planting trees and berry bushes. Nancy Wygant (4) distributes leaf mulch to build the soil in beds such as the Hannah House garden, where Nina Taylor (5) weeds the onion patch. A youth group sets up a stand (7) to share the harvest.



## WOODLANDS REGROWTH

Gardeners are bringing new life to another Philadelphia cemetery with deep roots in the city's horticultural history: The Woodlands, a 54-acre burial site at 40th Street and Woodland Avenue in the University City neighborhood. In 2016, a group of PHS members and other volunteers—collectively known as the Grave Gardeners—adopted 70 of the burial ground's "cradle graves," plots designed to look like children's beds, each having a headstone, a foot marker, and an enclosed planting space in between. The participants filled the beds with heirloom perennials, roses, bulbs, and ferns appropriate to the period when the graves were first established. The program will continue in 2017, with workshops on gravesite history, garden tending, and more. "Last year's gardeners were interested in learning more about the families whose graves they cared for," says Jessica Baumert, executive director of The Woodlands, "so this year we will offer a workshop on genealogy research."

Whether you are interested in horticulture or history, The Woodlands is worth a visit for its variety of attractions, especially in spring.

**Historic Home** Once the estate of William Hamilton, a noted botanist and plant collector who corresponded with Thomas Jefferson, The Woodlands (a National Historic Landmark) includes a Federal-style home (open to visitors) and burial sites for many noteworthy Philadelphians, such as the botanist and artist Ann Bartram Carr and the realist painter Thomas Eakins.

**Bulb Explosion** Last fall, the Grave Gardeners and others planted 6,000 heirloom varieties of bulbs, which will begin blooming this March and peak in mid-April.

**Azalea Show** Many varieties of spring-blooming azaleas, in red, pink, white, yellow, and other colors, can be found throughout the cemetery.

**Champion Trees** Among the more than 700 trees on the property, seven have earned the designation State Champion, which means they are the largest examples of their species in Pennsylvania. One, a sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*), puts on a spectacular show in midspring.

**Community Gardens** About 50 people from West Philadelphia and nearby neighborhoods sign up to tend their own vegetable plots at The Woodlands each season.

**Picnic Place** The property is one of the quietest and most beautiful locations at which to enjoy a picnic in the city, and it's easy to reach by bicycle or trolley.

Learn more about the Grave Gardeners program and all the other attractions of The Woodlands at [woodlandspah.org](http://woodlandspah.org).



Peaches Ramos, Historic Fair Hill board member, and other community activists worked to drive the drug trade away from this troubled neighborhood.

cemetery and the drug-infested streets around it. Neighbors including activist and block captain Peaches Ramos volunteered for around-the-clock shifts to keep dealers away from the corner of Ninth and Indiana. Their efforts, supported by the police and dubbed Operation Sunrise, succeeded in driving out the drug trade, and by 1993, local Quakers had raised enough money to buy the cemetery back. They established a nonprofit corporation, now called Historic Fair Hill, to manage the site.

## FOOD FOR ALL

Since then, thanks to the work of many people and the support of various organizations—including PHS—the once-weedy wasteland has been transformed into a lush, leafy oasis, which to a passerby on any of the surrounding streets seems to emerge out of nowhere from the gritty urban landscape. Just inside the burial ground's iron gate—past a sign that reads "Many buried here worked to end slavery and promote equality"—is the aptly named History Garden, which features crops such as okra, collards, elderberries, and strawberries. This plot also contains a collection of rare bean varieties that originated with various cultural groups, including Native Americans, Africans, Puerto Ricans, Quakers, and Pennsylvania Germans. The Fair Hill gardeners grow these beans not only for eating and to maintain the heirloom seed strains but also to honor the diverse people who have lived here.

“This neighborhood has been struggling and healing for the last few decades,” Barton says. Growing beans from each cultural group encourages “meaningful conversations that could otherwise be difficult without that anchor in food,” she adds. “Food is our common denominator.”

This garden—along with the Hannah House garden, named for a home for women and children in transition that once abutted the grounds—is now supported by a community of people, some of whom just a few years ago were afraid to step outside their homes.

### HEART OF CHANGE

A few years ago, around the time Barton started working at Fair Hill, Amir Elliott began volunteering. Two years later, his mother, Sechita Elliott, joined them. “This garden, and this community as a whole, has been a really big inspiration for me,” says Sechita, 33, who works with Barton as assistant gardener while also attending college. Among their tasks this year will be to add an irrigation system to the Hannah House garden—the group now uses water from a neighbor—and to figure out why the tomatoes have stopped thriving, a mystery that has inspired them to learn all they can about the many tomato pests and diseases.

The fresh produce grown at Historic Fair Hill is freely shared with the surrounding community. “Kids pick raspberries, climb trees, and get excited about hawks and watering tomato plants and eating strange things they never knew about,” Barton says. In summer, youth groups set up a farm stand, offering produce in exchange for donations. As part of the PHS City Harvest network, Fair Hill donates a share of its produce to Crossroads Community Center and Divine Light, organizations that help people who are food-insecure.

But, as Warrington says, food is just part of what Historic Fair Hill offers its neighbors. The site also serves as a place where friends and acquaintances can gather and socialize. In the 1970s, Gladys Wilkerson came to Philadelphia from Columbus County, North Carolina, where

*“This garden, and this community as a whole, has been a really big inspiration for me.”*

—Sechita Elliott (below), assistant gardener



she had grown up on a farm. Now 71 years old, she can no longer work in the garden, but she still enjoys visiting and talking with the gardeners. “It just reminds me of home,” she says.

Even a casual visitor can see that there is still more work to do in this neighborhood, but the burial ground’s green revival has shown area residents that real, lasting change is possible.

“The most important thing that the garden is doing is bringing people together,” Warrington says. “People of different ethnic groups and backgrounds are all working cooperatively, doing positive things for their community. It’s also giving kids job skills, life skills, and some education about healthy diet and healthy living.”

In this way, Fair Hill is staying true to its roots and growing all at once. 🌱

*Michele W. Berger is a Philadelphia-based writer whose work has appeared in the publications Audubon and Edible Philly and on the Science Friday website. Learn more about the gardens and activities of Historic Fair Hill at [historicfairhill.org](http://historicfairhill.org).*