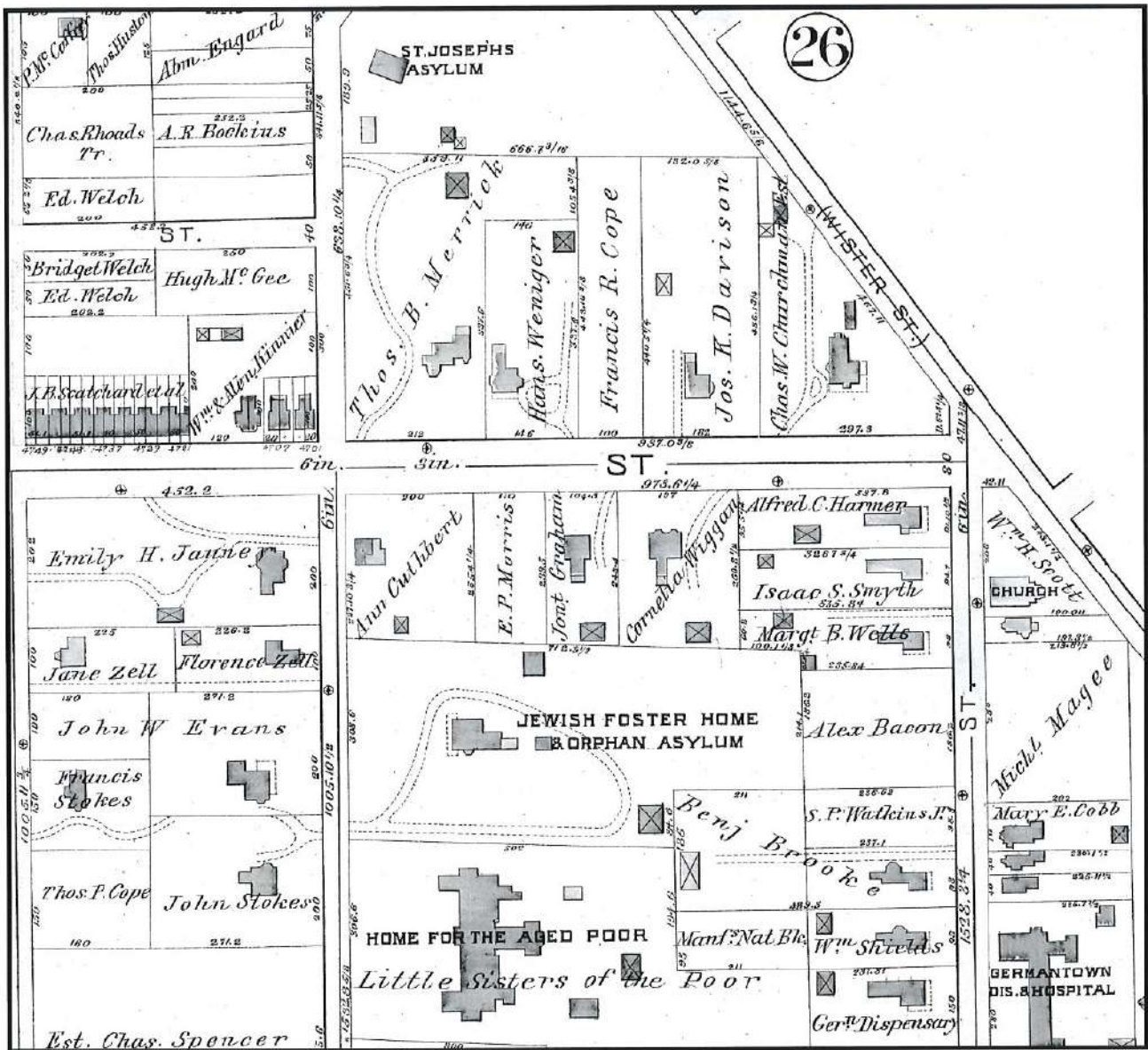


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- House of the Good Sheperd
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JEWISH FOSTER HOME AND ORPHANS ASYLUM OF PHILADELPHIA

(Jewish Foster Home; Foster Home for Hebrew Orphans)

By Dennis McGlinchey

The Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia was located at 700 Church Lane, just steps from the intersection of Chew Avenue and Church Lane in the East Germantown section of Philadelphia, adjacent to the Little Sisters of the Poor Home for the Aged. This institution has the distinction of being the first Jewish orphanage in America, serving its useful purpose from this location for almost 70 of its 95 years of institutional life.

When founded in 1855, it was known as the Jewish Foster Home. Through a reorganization in 1875, it was renamed the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia. Through a merger in 1929 with another Jewish orphanage, it was renamed the Foster Home for Hebrew Orphans. For all of its years of existence, the value of its mission to provide institutional care to orphaned, semi-orphaned and destitute Jewish children was argued in light of its alternative, that of caring for such children in a smaller foster home environment. That argument was ended when, in 1950, the East Germantown orphanage closed its doors forever, relinquishing the care of its remaining wards to foster home care.

Yet, its place in the history of Jewish foster care in America remains intact. And for the children it served, it did provide a safe and secure haven for their housing, care, nursing, education, recreation and nurturing during their childhood years that, for whatever the reason, could not be obtained through their natural family situation. So, it filled a need of the times, a need in the city of Philadelphia that an upstanding woman of great compassion and kindness saw early on and set about seeing it fulfilled. That woman was Rebecca Gratz.

Role of Rebecca Gratz

Rebecca Gratz, born in 1781, was a prominent Jewish educator and philanthropist. She was also a woman of



Rebecca Gratz, foundress of the Jewish Orphans Asylum. Photo courtesy of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the Jewish American Archives.

great beauty. It is surmised that she was the model for Rebecca, the heroine in Sir Walter Scott's classic novel *Ivanhoe*. While neither Gratz nor Scott would ever confirm the connection, neither would ever deny it. When asked, Rebecca would merely respond that some people said that it was so. Regardless of her wealth and beauty, Rebecca's inner calling was to dedicate her life to helping the needy, particularly orphaned children. She was one of the original founders of the Philadelphia Orphan Society, established in 1814 to administer the nonsectarian Philadelphia Orphan

Asylum. She was the society's secretary and served in that role until her death in 1869. At that time, Jewish orphans were looked after within the small Jewish community of Philadelphia. But the numbers grew in time. In 1850, alarmed at the sight of Jewish children peddling matches on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia, Rebecca formed "The Society," a committee of Jewish women, for the purpose of establishing an orphanage for homeless and indigent Jewish children. It took five years to amass enough funds to establish the Jewish Foster Home at 799 North 11th Street in 1855. Initially, there were just five children taken in, but the need grew to a point where, within five years, the founders were forced to look for larger quarters. So, in 1860, a larger home, located at 1431 North 15th Street, was purchased. Once the facility was established, funding of the Jewish Foster Home was a continuous challenge. City, state and federal funding of such institutions did exist, but only through grants that were not a continuous source of revenue. Funding mostly had to come from the benevolence within the Jewish community.

From 1855 to 1874, there was a rapid growth in the Jewish population in Philadelphia, mostly from European countries. That growth led to disunity, disorganization and turmoil among the factions within the Jewish community which, in turn, had an impact on the stream of funds to the Jewish Foster Home. Up until then, the fundraising effort was handled by a collective group of women operating as The Jewish Foster Home Society of Philadelphia. But many individuals felt that a greater impact could be realized by turning the fundraising function over to prominent Jewish men in the business, financial, cultural and religious community. In 1874, this was put in motion with the formation of a Board of Council who undertook a complete reorganization of the institution's governing board. This led in 1875 to the establishment of a new charter, constitution and by-laws to guide the running of the institution. An executive committee was established to oversee the actual operation of the institution while a board of directors was established to oversee its finances and funding. The new charter also brought about a new name for the institution: Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia. This reorganization proved to be a very successful move and a timely one at that because the continuing influx of Jewish immigrants



JFHOA at 700 East Church Lane, circa 1905 (before 4-story addition and before the gift of the caribou statue.) Photo courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, Philadelphia, Pa.

brought about an increasing number of Jewish children in need of the services of the orphanage. Strong leadership would be needed to guide the institution through the growth years that would lie ahead. By 1880, over-crowding conditions at 1431 North 15th Street were so serious that action was needed to address them, and the executive committee and board of directors set about to find a new home for the institution. Their search would ultimately lead them to Germantown.

Locating in Germantown

The committee was authorized to purchase property up to a maximum of \$35,000. A site was found on Fisher's Lane in Germantown. However, that location turned out to be unavailable at the time, the Fall of 1880. An alternate site was found on Mill Street (later renamed Church Lane) near Chew Avenue. This property was the 4½ acre estate owned by J. Frailey Smith, a wealthy Philadelphia businessman who died in June 1880. His estate agreed to the \$35,000 purchase offer. The property contained a fine four-story stone and brick mansion and stable, both built in 1870¹, and a well-manicured lawn. Improvements, alterations and furnishings added \$11,364 to the total cost.

Dedication of the new Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia took place on June 12, 1881. As reported by S.M. Fleishman in the historical publication he authored for the orphanage's 50th Jubilee celebration

¹ Web site of Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, <http://www.philadelphiabuildings.com/pab>, administered by The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

in 1905, called *The History of the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum*, the dedication was a huge event attended by over 3,000 persons. It was held on the vast lawns on the property. As reported, most folks arrived by train at the Wingohocking train station. While carriages were available to transport, many opted to make the 10-minute walk to the home. The 39 child wards were moved into the home within three weeks of the dedication. Mr. Fleishman was hired as the home's live-in superintendent, with his wife as supervisor, and both served in that capacity for 28 years until their retirement in 1909.

While the new home could accommodate 150 children, the dining and kitchen facilities soon were found to be inadequate. So, in 1884, funding was obtained to build an addition to the rear of the building that would provide enlarged facilities. In 1888, the adjoining rear property that backs to Penn Street was purchased for \$10,000. This was to allow for access and connection to the main sewer line on Penn Street to provide badly-needed drainage from the property. In 1892, a large stone and brick gymnasium/auditorium was built on the grounds at a cost of \$60,000. This building also contained a pool and additional rooms

and lavatories on the upper floors. All told, these were staggering outlays of money for the times and in such a short period of time. Yet, the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia, herein referred to by the acronym JFHOA, came through this growth period with only a small \$15,000 mortgage and little other debt. For each building campaign, a fund was set up to which subscriptions could be purchased. In addition, much funding was provided by the direct generosity of individuals. For the remainder of its existence, the JFHOA was a well-funded institution without the inhibiting struggles experienced in its early years. While budgets were always developed and deficits were often experienced, especially in the war years as the number of child wards increased, during periods of plagues and sickness, and other setbacks, the deficits, while they had to be accounted for, were covered by the generosity of the Jewish community.

In 1905, the JFHOA celebrated the 50th anniversary of its founding. In commemoration of this milestone, a bronze, life-size reindeer was donated anonymously to the home and placed prominently outside the front entrance where it would remain until its removal in the late 1940s.



Hebrew orphan wards on porch of 700 East Church Lane, circa 1923. Photo courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, Philadelphia, Pa.

This reindeer, or caribou, became the home's endearing symbol and mascot. The sports teams that were to come as well as the home's newsletter were named after this mascot, the Caribou.²

According to U.S. Census records, the number of Jews living in Philadelphia in 1880 was around 15,000. By 1900, that number climbed to around 75,000 because of an influx of Jewish immigrants from Germany, Russia and Eastern Europe. Consequently, the number of children needing the services of JFHOA also increased. The 1907 *Annual Report of the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia* shows that the home was operating at its capacity of 150 children. But, as indicated in that report, relief was in sight, for it was during that year that ground was broken on a four-story addition to the main building. This addition, built to the right of the front entrance and closely resembling the original architecture of that grand mansion, was completed in 1910 at a cost of \$62,000. This added room for 100 more children for a total residential capacity of 250. With the completion, the genders were then separated, boys in the eastern wing, girls in the new western wing. There was an elegance and style to this Victorian building which resembled more of a private boarding school than an orphanage.

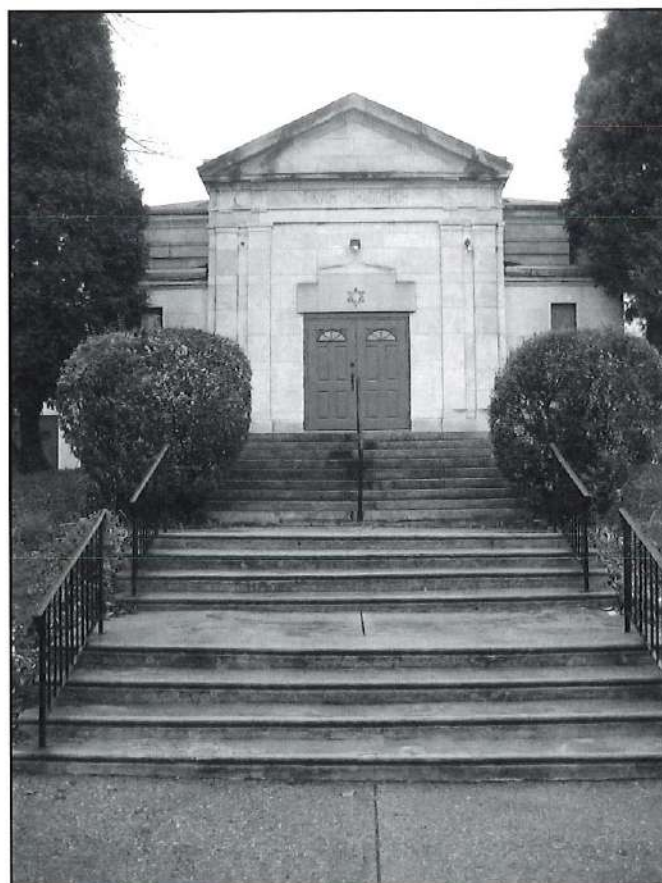
The Care of the Children

Children could be admitted into the home if they were full orphans (loss of both parents), half orphans (one living parent unable to care for the child), deserted by parents or were indigent (parents too poor to care for them). They could be admitted from toddler age up to 15 or 16. If a parent were living, he or she could visit with a child at the home on Sundays. If the parent's situation improved and a petition was filed, the child could be returned to the parent.

In the early years until 1896, elementary education was provided in the home by hired teachers. After 1896, the children received their formal education in the public schools within the community, namely Francis D. Pastorius Elementary School, Theodore Roosevelt Junior High School and Germantown High School. If the child showed academic promise, he or she could attend the nearby Central High School for Boys or Philadelphia Girls High School. If a child showed less academic aptitude or an inclination towards a trade, he or she was sent to any of the many trade schools in the Philadelphia area. Only in elementary school did the children travel as a group from the home to the school, overseen by supervisors. While this caused them to



Miriam Wolf Infirmary after completion in 1907. Photo courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, Philadelphia, Pa.



Benjamin Teller Memorial Synagogue today, Chew Ave entrance.(now the Third Eternal Baptist Church).Photo by Dennis McGlinchey. 2009.

stand out as "the orphans," it was deemed necessary because of their young age. In all the other higher-level schools, the children were free to travel to and from school with their select group of friends. They were also encouraged to take

² *Annual Report of the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum—1905* digitized by Google.

part in any sports, clubs, or activities offered by their respective schools. Every attempt was made to have the children “fit in” rather than “stand out” and to have them be a part of the normal school environment to which they attended.

Upon their school graduation, the children were placed in work situations and were relocated to live in private homes but still under the care of the JFHOA. In effect, they “graduated” from the orphanage as well. They continued to be such wards until the age of 21 or sooner if they progressed to the level of self-sufficiency. If a child showed an academic inclination for college, every attempt was made to provide for such an opportunity. Again, this was done outside of the orphanage while the child remained its ward. So, at any point in time, the JFHOA was caring for those living in the orphans’ home as well as those in work or school situations living off premises. For example, according to the 1912 *Annual Report of the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia*, while there were 195 children living in the home, another 77 were living off premises but still under the care of the JFHOA. In addition to their formal education and training, the JFHOA also sought to educate the children in the dogma, traditions and customs of Orthodox Judaism. Not only did the institution seek to shelter, clothe, feed and nurse these needy children, but as reported in their annual reports, they also set about to turn them into “fine Jewish men and women.”

As the number of wards of the JFHOA grew, so did the deficit. But, as mentioned, the generosity within the Jewish community kept pace through the establishment of endowments, personal donations and other contributions. Along with the addition to the main building, the early 1900s saw a further construction boom that added three buildings to the JFHOA campus, all three completely given by individuals or families. In 1907, the Miriam Wolf Infirmary was given by the Wolf family for the purpose of treating the children of the institution as well as providing space for the quarantining of children who came down with infectious diseases. In 1915, the Benedict Gimbel Manual Training School was provided by the Gimbel family (of the department store) for the purpose of having an onsite facility where the children could learn a skill or trade. In addition, the family endowed monies to be used to cover the salaries of teachers. Also in 1915, the white marble Benjamin Teller Memorial Synagogue was presented to the institution by Jennie Teller as a memorial to her husband to provide a dedicated place for religious services for the children and staff. Such generosity shows why the Jewish Foster Home



Bernard Rademan, ward of the home and later beloved supervisor and mentor of the children, in the Teller Synagogue, circa early 1930s. Photo from the collection of Bernard Rademan.

and Orphan Asylum of Philadelphia was regarded as one of the better endowed orphanages in the United States. When there was a need, it was quickly met.

In 1929, a merger came about of two Jewish orphanages—the Hebrew Orphans Home and the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia. The smaller Hebrew Orphans Home, located on 12th Street in downtown Philadelphia, was established in 1896 to serve the growing needs in that downtown location. But the economic climate of the late 1920s raised the question of the need and efficiency of having two such orphan homes just miles from one another. The decision was then made to merge the two at the larger East Germantown location on Church Lane. The merged entity would then be called the Foster Home for Hebrew Orphans (FHHO), and to then be placed under the care and control of the Federation of Jewish Charities in the city of Philadelphia. The 101 transferees brought the number of children to near the 250 capacity of the Germantown location.

“Home Guys”

Jules Doneson, a former “home guy,” as wards of the institution called themselves, regardless of gender, has described life in the orphans’ home in his book called *Deeds of Love: A History of the Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum of Philadelphia—America’s First Jewish Orphanage*.³

³ (Ashland, Ohio: Vantage Press, 1996).



Caribou Varsity Baseball team, 1935. Beril "Pop" Weiser is left of 2nd row. Photo courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, Philadelphia, Pa.

The children were provided three square meals a day, even as the Depression was having an adverse effect on the Germantown community outside of the institution's walls. The residents had more than ample clothing, soled shoes, nursing when needed, a good education and training, excellent recreation facilities, entertainment opportunities, a strong sense of comradeship, security and sense of belonging within the home.

But, as a few home guys recalled for Doneson, they sorely missed what most in a traditional family environment had and perhaps took for granted: the love, affection and attention of living with a parent or parents. Some expressed feeling isolated from "normal" society and felt stigmatized and embarrassed by the label and life of an orphan. Many mentioned the fear, dread and emotions felt upon being admitted to the home. Their life was a regimented one, with dining, small chores, religious services, recreation, bedtime all at appointed times. Rules were in place and enforced. But this isn't to say it was a harsh, uncaring and unloving environment.

All of those interviewed mentioned the kindness shown to them from within the home and outside. Folks mentioned included: the beloved Miss Esther Baum, who devoted her life to working with the orphans and being a caring friend to all in the home until her death in 1911; Beril "Pop" Weiser, the home's cobbler for 25 years until 1947, remembered for the love and attention he showered

on all the children at the home; Ethel "Aunt Ethel" Newman, a much-loved supervisor for the girls who was known for smothering the girls with love and attention; Bernie Rademan, a ward of the home who later became a supervisor, role model and mentor for his help, concern and kindness to those in his direct care, and those not; and Miss Fannie Holtz, who devoted her life to caring for the younger child wards, looking upon them as *her* children.

Every attempt was made to provide the children with a normal life in their formative years. With the home's excellent sports facilities, there were teams for baseball, basketball, and other sports that competed internally against one another and externally against other such institutional teams. And the children were always encouraged to join their school's teams, clubs and activities as they so desired.

There were many interest and social clubs at the home which the children could join, and they were urged to do so. Jewish holidays were always celebrated as well as other secular holidays. Trips to the Colonial or Orpheum Theatres every Saturday to see movies as guests of the theatre managers were highlights of the week. The home had its own Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops which engaged in normal scouting activities, including camping trips. In the summer, visits to Willow Grove Park for a day of rides, amusements and picnicking were popular. There were excursions to see Philadelphia A's baseball games at Shibe Park, courtesy of the ballclub. Each year, the children went to see the Ringling Brothers circus, courtesy of the Gimbel family. Except for the very young, the children were



Front of JFHOA mansion in 2007 (after 2000 fire). The portion to the right of burnt-out tower is the 1910 addition to mansion. Photo courtesy of GD.

free to visit with friends outside the home, though the times were specified. For the wards with parents, Sunday afternoons were always set aside for family visits to the home. So, while no child would ever choose to be an orphan if given the option, the administrators and caretakers of the JFHOA/FHHO made every attempt to make the best of the situation for the children by providing them with as normal a childhood as possible.

Through the tough economic times of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s, the home flourished in its mission to care for needy Jewish children, often operating at or near capacity. But that was not to last. In 1950, the decision was made to close the doors of the Foster Home for Hebrew Orphans forever. The prevailing wisdom at the time gaining widespread acceptance was that the worst foster home was better than any orphan institution. And so, after serving in its righteous mission of care for those children in need for 95 years, the orphanage was closed. Those children remaining as wards of the home were placed in a foster home setting. The Church Lane campus was put up for sale. In short time, the property was purchased by the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a Catholic religious order of nuns, whose mission is focused on children's education. After some remodeling, Ancilla Domini Academy opened in 1953 as a boarding and commuting private school for girls at the pre-elementary through high school levels. One building, however, not included in the sale was the Benjamin Teller Memorial Synagogue; it was sold and established as a private synagogue, founded by German Holocaust survivors and refugees and named Congregation Tikvoh Chadoshoh. This was easily adaptable to such public use because, when built, it included an outside entrance directly on to Chew Avenue. An addition was built to the rear of the building which sealed the entrance that had been used by the children and staff of the orphans home at its 1915 opening.⁴

Mid- to Late-Century Changes

In 1975, because of declining enrollment and increasing costs, the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus were forced to close Ancilla Domini Academy⁵. The campus was then sold to Manna Bible Institute, a day and evening school founded in 1944 as a faith ministry in the education of the Bible and Christianity. In the late 1970s, a devastating fire severely damaged the main building. Without the funds to do the extensive repairs, the building was sealed

and sat vacant and in disrepair for many years. Still, there was renewed interest in the late 1990s to renovate and restore the campus to serve as the Germantown Settlement Charter School, which could educate up to 500 children in grades 5 through 8. However, another fire in the late 1990s to the main building and the auditorium/gymnasium destroyed what remained of these buildings, dashing hopes once and for all that these historic buildings could be restored and once again provide a useful function in the community. The buildings and grounds sat as an eyesore and safety threat until 2007 when nearby LaSalle University purchased the property along with the adjoining former Little Sisters of the Poor Home for the Aged and Germantown Hospital properties, all to be used for campus expansion.

In 2008, what remained of the once-graceful buildings that made up the campus of the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia were razed; the lot is now landscaped and used as athletic fields for the university. The Congregation Tikvoh Chadoshoh Synagogue, once the orphan home's Benjamin Teller Memorial Synagogue, closed in the 1980s as the congregation merged with the Oxford Circle Jewish Community Center, which in turn and in time merged with Congregation Adath Jeshurun in Elkins Park.⁵ The building was then sold and is today the Third Eternal Baptist Church, at 5364 Chew Avenue. Aside from this white marble building and the stone wall and steps along Church Lane, there is nothing to remind that the site once contained the first Jewish orphanage in the United States. In 2010, the Jewish Foster Home and Orphans Asylum of Philadelphia, operating in its final years under the name of Foster Home for Hebrew Orphans, will have been closed for sixty years. But its place in Jewish history, American history and Germantown history will live on forever.

Dennis McGlinchey was born and raised in East Germantown and currently resides in Plymouth Meeting with his wife, Debbie and children, Colin and Lauren. He has a love of all things Germantown. His previous contributions to the Crier are "The Movie Theatres of Germantown" (Fall 2007) and "The History of Immaculate Conception Parish" (Spring 2008).

⁴ Information about Ancilla Domini Academy and the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus provided by Sr. Gloria Petrone ACJ, the last principal of Ancilla Domini Academy upon its closing in 1975.

⁵ Information on Tikvoh Chadoshoh Synagogue provided by Sarah Sherman, Associate Archivist for the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, Temple University, Urban Archives, Samuel L. Paley Library, Philadelphia.