

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 16, 2009

Wilmington Friends School (est. 1748): By far the oldest continuous private school in Delaware, Wilmington Friends was founded in 1748 at Fourth and West Streets in Wilmington, the center of an area now called Quaker Hill. The school may have been housed in the then-existing Friends Meeting House, but if so it soon moved across West Street into what must have been a one-room schoolhouse. Attached to this little schoolhouse (or on the site of it), a red brick school building appeared in the 19th century, which had additions added frequently until the 1920s. This rambling building and the large brick meetinghouse across the street (built in 1816) were active hiding places for escaping slaves using the Underground Railroad. Hand-dug tunnels connected the properties to the bank of the Christina River, four short blocks away.

The school was open to all denominations, but for many years before and after 1900, members of the Religious Society of Friends got a discount in their children's tuition. Members of Wilmington Monthly Meeting, which owned and operated the school, got a larger discount. About 1897, with three trains a day between Yorklyn and Wilmington, 15-year-old Warren Marshall was enrolled, soon followed by his sister Anna, his brother Clarence, and his cousins Albert and Henry Marshall and Henry and Ellen Mitchell. The Marshalls boarded the train at Yorklyn; the Mitchells near Hockessin at Mill Creek (Valley Road). Except for the Auburn Heights Marshalls, the others had a walk of 1½ miles each way to catch the train. On the Wilmington end, however, the B & O Station was at the foot of Market Street, seven short blocks from school. Warren and Albert were graduated in the Class of 1900.

The enlarged brick school was built tight to the brick sidewalk, with the first floor being only one step above it. In my father's time, the school may not have touched Fourth Street, but it was three full floors above ground and had a basement housing a dark and dingy gym. Toward the east (looking toward the center of the city), the ground dropped off precipitously, and Tatnall Street, one short block from West Street, was at least 25 feet lower in elevation. The cindered backyard provided the only playground. Older students, however, were allowed to play across the street in the meetinghouse yard and in the cemetery behind. In the early 20th century, a new gym with a racetrack balcony was built on the 5th Street end of the property, and an elementary school was added tight to the corner of 4th and West. Other than kindergarten elsewhere, I began my educational career in September 1930, in Ruth Pusey's first grade, in a room on this corner, first floor. Her father operated the flour mill at Ashland, her mother was Ruth Marshall's great aunt, and all the Puseys long had been members of Hockessin Friends Meeting.

The old school was a neat (cool) place. Although the Underground Railroad tunnels were off limits, they were nonetheless exciting places to explore. There was a great view of the city from the fire escape landing just off the third-floor auditorium. The lunchroom and the chemistry lab were also on the third floor with circuitous ways to get to them. From the second-floor hallways, five or six steps had to be climbed to reach the large classrooms on that floor. The old gym in the basement had been converted to a shop, which sometimes was called "manual training." The track around the balcony in the "new" gym was banked and covered with leather, and a sliding pole was the favorite way to change floors: track to main gym to locker rooms in the basement. I attended school here until the school was moved to Alapocas in 1937.

For the next 20 years or so, the old school building was used for low-income apartments. I'm sure building codes eventually made this impossible, and it was demolished about 1960. The gym building along Fifth Street remained for 25 more years, also divided into apartments. I'm reasonably sure all is gone now. More on the first years at the Alapocas campus may appear in a future edition of the *News*.