

Memorial Minute, Barbara Grant Nnoka
May 18, 1922 – September 4, 2009



Barbara Grant Nnoka, a member of Friends Meeting of Washington for more than 30 years, found Quakerism as a young adult and grew into it. Her spiritual roots deepened, while her sense of adventure moved her to boldly go where few women of her time had gone before.

Notes found in her Bible about the story of Mary and Martha (John 11:38-42), which Barbara apparently made as a young adult while taking a class at Pendle Hill, reveal some of the principles that informed her life. She wrote, “Ideally - as in the organization of AFSC - that work is "right" which grows from a compelling - shared - uniting feeling which dictates a Martha-like response - where the doing is an extension of the sensitive beings gathered primarily not for the purpose of doing, but gathered in order to be loving, sensitive, already in touch in God.” Barbara 's life manifested this Martha-like activism grown from a Mary-like center. As she put it in a letter to a Friend in 1988, “I am a very nuts-and-bolts person; I prefer to do “Martha-work” around the Meeting, and I am by training and preferences, a one-on-one person.”

Barbara was born in Hartford, Connecticut, to Edgar and Anna Grant. She attended a Christian Science Sunday school, and reported that she never missed a day of school to ill health, a fact she attributed to the prayers of her mother and uncle. She grew up in Wethersfield, Connecticut, with her parents and younger brother, Donald. From her Swedish relatives, she learned needlework, sewing, Swedish cooking, and a few words of the language. In high school, she was voted “most likely to succeed.” She attended and

graduated from Colby College in Waterville, Maine, in 1943. During her college summers she worked as a counselor at the *Hartford Times* Farm for underprivileged children. She credited this experience with allowing her to take her first steps toward her lifelong commitment to justice as an essential principle of socio-political organization.

It was at Haverford College where she first met and worked with Quakers. She received a master's degree in “relief and reconstruction” there in 1945—one of a few dozen women trained by Haverford to become social workers for postwar reconstruction in Europe. She often said that this year-long program made a crucial difference in how she perceived the world.

During the decade after graduating from Haverford, she worked for the Henry Street Settlement in New York City, the Annie Wright Seminary (an Episcopalian boarding school for girls in Tacoma, Washington), the Friends Committee on National Legislation in Washington, D.C., and the American Friends Service Committee. She met many of the major thinkers in Quakerism of the time, including Howard Brinton and Douglas Steere, and often said afterwards that she felt guided by them and by the experience of working with them. She worked with Raymond Wilson as he started the Friends Committee on National Legislation in what is now the Children’s Library at Friends Meeting of Washington. Friend Wilson's belief in a peaceable future stood in front of Barbara for her whole life, and she remained committed to it and to the political activism he thought necessary to bring it into being.

In the early 1950s, she began to discern a leading to go to Africa to work. In 1954, she convinced both the Nigerian Embassy in Washington D.C. and the British Colonial Office in London to allow her to take up a teaching position in Uyo, Nigeria. Her first position was as an Adult Education Officer in a program organized by the British Colonial Government in Eastern Nigeria to promote community development and teach village women basic literacy and arithmetic, hygiene, and baby care. These might not have represented what Barbara considered the overriding priorities for the situation. Nevertheless, she saw the assignment as a learning experience and threw herself into it with her usual sense of adventure.

In November of that year, Nigeria held its first elections and she was asked to oversee a voting booth. The man she was to marry showed up as an observer for the National Council of Nigeria; his party won. She married Alphonsus Ethelbert Ifeanyi Nnoka, and her contract as a teacher was immediately terminated because married women were not allowed to teach. She then served as an aide to Nnamadi Azikiwe, who became the first Prime Minister of Nigeria . Later, when the marriage ended in divorce, she taught English in secondary schools for boys for six years, and for four years served as Principal of Yejide Girls Grammar School in Ibadan—the only American in that part of the world.

Her relationship with the Religious Society of Friends continued to deepen during this time. At Ibadan, she found enough Quaker families to gather a small Meeting for Worship every other weekend. She also received weekly letters of support and encouragement from Friends in the U.S. She said that she felt carried by those letters

throughout the 12 years she spent in Nigeria. In turn, Barbara was an active correspondent for her entire life, writing perhaps thousands of letters; friends mentioned the care and nurture they received from her written hand.

In 1966, with Nigeria headed toward civil war, Barbara decided to return home with her twin children. She had spent the summer of 1964 in the U.S. to judge the effects of the newly minted Civil Rights laws. Now, she coped with the challenges of raising biracial children as a single white mother in the 1960s. She taught African studies at the State University of New York at New Paltz (eventually becoming chair of the department), joined the New Paltz Friends Meeting, and attended New York Yearly Meeting and Friends General Conference gatherings. In 1971, Barbara moved to West Chester, Pennsylvania, to run the Friends Shelter for Girls in Cheyney; while there, she joined the West Chester Friends Meeting. In 1975, the family moved again, this time to Arlington, Virginia, where Barbara worked for the Arlington County Chapter of the Red Cross. She ran programs for military families and directed the chapter's disaster response, often donning her Red Cross coat in the middle of the night to respond to some local crisis. An exceptionally good organizer, Barbara could turn well-meaning efforts into an efficient, effective response. She also found time during these years to obtain a second Master's degree in legal studies from Antioch College.

In Arlington, Barbara was part of a tenant group that worked to save Colonial Village, a complex of more than a thousand garden apartments built in Arlington in the late 1930's. Mobil Corporation purchased the complex in 1977, proposing to replace much of it with high-rise buildings. After a tenant campaign that included getting federal, state, and local historic landmark designation, Mobil compromised, and most of the complex was preserved as a mixture of condos, long-term rentals, a low-income rental section, and a tenant cooperative, where Barbara lived for the rest of her life.

At the same time, Barbara was becoming active in the Friends Meeting of Washington, which she joined in 1979. There, she served as a stalwart member (and often as clerk) to many committees, was appointed to the Trustees, helped to write the meeting's history (including contributing to one chapter during the final weeks of her life), shepherded the Mary Jane Simpson Scholarship Committee that helped dozens of D.C. public school graduates attend college, and provided practical and loving support to generations of members and attenders. She gave firm guidance to the Meeting, helping its members and attenders to face and resolve differences of opinion over everything from same sex marriage to automatic dishwashers. Many Friends commented on Barbara's ability to deliver gentle, solid advice that was grounded in an acceptance and love for the whole person, "warts and all." She was caring and yet eminently pragmatic and no-nonsense. Her advice was sound, and sought by many. "What would Barbara think?" became a question on which many issues turned. She was also an exceptional recorder of minutes, able to discern both the content and the sense of a meeting and feed it back to the group in a way that allowed them to move forward.

Barbara's political activism continued after her tutelage under Raymond Wilson. She read the newspaper daily—especially any articles on Africa—and corresponded regularly with

her elected officials, both by letter and, later, by email. She campaigned for a number of candidates, including Barack Obama, for whom she made calls in 2008. During the Iraq war, she visited her Senators and Congressman with groups of local Quakers, and even went to speak with the legal counsel of CACI, a contractor in Arlington responsible for staffing the interrogation team at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, which was accused of torture. She advised the counsel to get CACI to drop that contract, which it eventually did.

Upon retirement at age 65, Barbara turned in her practical way to consider how to best use the next stage of her life. “There are times,” she wrote, “when one must face one’s limitations, even one’s mortality. I had to admit that at 65 I had a finite amount of time, probably even less possibility of continued good health, and I had quite limited financial resources. I had whatever ability I had been endowed with, plus some training and education which I had been given, and I had all the emotional warts and scars of white, middle-class, post World War II America. I had had some adventures that enhanced my private times and gave me my two children and grandchildren. An almost chance encounter with Quakers in a graduate study program at Haverford College gave me a comfortable religious affiliation—eventually.

“But that was it. No matter what I wanted to make of the rest of my life, what I have been and done up to now has given me whatever—and all—I have to work with. It does not deny me my dreams and hopes for a better future for those who follow me, including the possibility of a world without hunger...but it does shift the responsibility for some of the achievement to those who follow me.”

She went on to give significant gifts of time and expertise to the Meeting, gently guiding its members and attenders through many difficulties, helping to write its history, and organizing its resources to benefit graduates of the D.C. Public Schools.

In her 80's, Barbara was diagnosed with breast cancer. She consented to surgery to remove a lump, but when the cancer returned four years later, decided to reject treatment. To avoid that treatment when she needed care, she spent a brief period at a Christian Science nursing home until entering into hospice care. When she returned from the nursing home, she pronounced herself well-satisfied with her adventure. She died the following week.

Barbara is survived by her daughter Catherine, her son Barrett and his wife Judith, her grandson Carl, her granddaughter Meredith, her sister-in-law Jayne Grant, her nieces, and multiple F/friends who knew and loved her.