Associations as Assets in the Urban Community: A Study of Two Inner-city Neighborhoods in Camden

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INTRODUCTION: A SNAPSHOT EVERY 85 YEARS

At the beginning of the 21st century, the City of Camden, New Jersey, resembles many other gritty cities in the northeastern section of the United States. Its housing stock consists largely of two-story brick row houses, many of which are in need of repair and some of complete rehabilitation. The occasional church tower, school mass, prison, or hospital complex relieves the repetitive perspective of treeless blocks. In some parts of the city, the decaying mass of former industrial titans, such as Campbell Soup and RCA, may be seen.

Massive expressways carve their way through the city’s disparate neighborhoods, and over its sluggish creeks. The western boundary of the city is formed by a great river, the Delaware, and much of its riverfront land is steadily being cleared to create a set of 21st century centers of entertainment and amusement. South of this development lies the port of Camden and several waste conversion facilities.

At the city’s core, a set of disorganized urban towers rise to the modest height of 20 stories, though one, City Hall, is notable for the quotation from native son Walt Whitman that adorns its crown: “In a dream I saw a city invincible.”

Among the 85,000 residents of Camden are some who visualize the city as it appeared in earlier times. One such group has been known to stand at the corner of Second and Spruce, looking west over a quarter-mile of industrial land toward the banks of the Delaware River. These individuals recall how, in 1830, the river’s banks reached all the way to Second Street, before the desire for industrial land led to a massive infill of the riverbed. And they recall how, in the 1830s, the place they now call “Fettersville” became home to hundreds of free African-Americans, fleeing the bonds of slavery by boat.

Two miles south of that corner, another set of Camden residents not infrequently gather in a tree-shaded square at the heart of the remarkably attractive urban village they call “Fairview”. There they recall how their neighborhood was designed and constructed during the last years of World War I as a place of residence for workers at the nearby shipyards. They walk through the curving streets of their special place, down a series of commons and past a number of churches, shops, and buildings that host a library, a parochial school, and a neighborhood historical society.

The groups who gather in Fettersville and Fairview share not only an abiding interest in the history of their neighborhoods; they also seek to translate their respective histories into stories that can be shared with others both within and beyond their neighborhoods. They see their history as an asset that might serve and enhance the viability and attractiveness of their communities, and they join with others in association in efforts to define and realize their visions.

The present study seeks to understand how groups of individuals attached to these two Camden neighborhoods seek to advance the interests they share. We delve into the workings of these neighborhoods by conducting what we call a “civil society census”; we analyze how the principal groups at work in these neighborhoods mobilize their assets and access larger
systems of power and resources; we listen to the concerns of residents as to the current struggles they face in their daily lives in the neighborhoods; and we offer observations and a willingness to work with these groups in clarifying and advancing their goals.

Ours is thus an agenda of “action” or “transparent research” (Cf. Milofsky, 2000)—combining the reflective observations and generalized theories of social science with the imperatives to make things better of the practitioner and activist.² It is an approach that rests on the belief that individuals organized in patterns of community organization can make a difference in the quality of their lives. In other words, we begin with the assertion that there exists a strong potential to improve things in the “third sector” of society—groups of citizens who join together in voluntary nonprofit organization to address the common good of places, values, and traditions important to them.

I. ASSOCIATION AS ASSET IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

A. THE ROLE OF THE THIRD SECTOR

A simple way to understand what forces are at play in society is provided by what this paper’s senior author calls the PECTS schema (Cf. Van Til, 2000). Based on an almost totally incomprehensible system developed some years back by the Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons (1966), this way of categorizing society’s workings suggests to us that every social organization, whether a family or a town or a nation, has to solve four problems if it is to thrive, or even survive. These problems are: 1) setting goals, 2) attracting resources, 3) sharing meaning, and 4) sticking together.

Every society has to solve these problems, too, and that is where the PECTS come in. We tend to develop a set of institutions around each of these needs, as follows:

P=Politics (or Government): how decisions are made about basic problems we face in our communities. In a country like our own, this is done by a system we call "constitutional democracy."

E=The Economy: how work is organized in order to make our livings, produce goods and services, and create wealth. In a country like our own, this is done by a system we call "mixed capitalism."

² Milofsky identifies transparent research as “a strategy in which the subjects of ethnographic research are fully involved in designing the research project, collecting the data, and analyzing results. Transparent research is a variety of action research in that inquiry is designed to serve the needs of the people studied.” In the present research, one member of the research team (Gould) served as president of the Fettesville Collaborative during the period of study, another (Brennan) was a long-time community leader and activist in Fairview, and a third (Wallace) was for one term a resident of Fairview.
C=Culture: how meaning is made of life through language, ethnic identity, and religion. These tasks are accomplished through structures we call families, neighborhoods, and communities.

TS=The Third Sector (sometimes called the voluntary or nonprofit sector): how fellowship or common cause is created by joining with others in voluntary association. In our society, this is done by means of some million and a half tax-exempt organizations and many more clubs, groups, and voluntary associations.

An important use of the PECTS system is that it reminds us that society's major institutions are always in interaction with each other, and that transactions continually flow between one sector and another.

From the point of view of the individual in society, the activities of third sector organizations affect everyday life in a number of ways. We may choose to receive medical care from a third-sector hospital; we may turn to third sector associations for information on an illness we have. Additionally, we will find ourselves called upon (sometimes by phone at inconvenient times) to support third-sector organizations through individual solicitations or by participating in the United Way. And in our community life, we will find that various nonprofit athletic, social, civic, business, and religious organizations often merit our interest, participation, and support. Indeed, the nearly one and one-half million formally certified nonprofit organizations within the United States, not to mention the almost ten million other voluntary associations, are inescapable parts of our daily lives.

This study looks at the third sector in two Camden neighborhoods: Fettersville, developed in the 1830s, and Fairview, developed in the 1910s. In a city plagued by political corruption and corporate decline, we probe the role of the third sector in meeting the needs of its residents.

**B. THE PROCESS OF ASSET DEVELOPMENT**

Many older American cities are today troubled by an array of problems. Massive shifts in the economy have taken away the "ladder of opportunity" that American cities once offered. Americans think of low-income neighborhoods as problems due to their deficiencies and needs. This attitude has in turn made these communities view themselves as people with needs that must be met by outsiders, as places lacking in what social scientists have come to call "social capital" (Cf. Putnam, 2000). These low-income neighborhoods become consumers of services with few incentives for the residents of these communities to become producers.

John McKnight and his colleagues have compiled an agenda for building communities from the inside out (Cf. Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). These troubled, low-income areas, which suffer from poor economies, loss of industrial jobs, and the disappearance of decent employment, need to take actions into their own hands to save their dying neighborhoods. According to McKnight and many others, asset-based community development can help these neighborhoods rejuvenate themselves.
Asset-based community development refers to the range of approaches that work from the principle that a community can be built only by focusing on the strengths and capacities of the citizens and associations that call the community home. Individuals can offer an array of assets including knowledge, skills, resources, values, and resident commitment. Groups and organizations of struggling communities offer local residents a place to come together to pursue common goals. Furthermore, institutions within troubled communities are resources because they directly advocate community development. The talents of individuals, the power and direction of citizens' associations, and the resources of local institutions play central roles in the revitalization of devastated urban communities.

McKnight argues that there are two approaches to community development. The first highlights a community's needs, deficiencies, and problems, and then seeks external assistance in rectifying these deficits. The second approach, which he favors, focuses on a commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets. Capacity-focused development rests on the belief that significant community development only happens when the local community is fully committed to the effort.

The key to asset-based development and neighborhood regeneration involves locating those local assets that are most significant, and then to connect them in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness. Asset-based development begins by harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development projects. Among the most significant assets are individual talents and skills, community-based associations, and the various nonprofit, business, and governmental organizations located in the community. Asset-based community development seeks to establish a sense of responsibility among the various structures within the community. This approach also involves effectively organizing the search for external resources. Community agenda setting is crucial in assuring the impact of external organizations within the community. It is important that every community feels that it is in control of its own destiny.

Asset-based community development focuses on three main ideas:

1) Every community contains within it assets and gifts to be utilized. Community development begins within the community.

2) Asset-based development is internally focused. This means that citizens must be engaging in agenda building and problem solving within the community.

3) Asset-based community development is geared towards the building of relationships. The key is to align all effective elements in a community in order to enhance capacities and strengths. Community development is seen as a process of empowering structures with creativity, hope and, most importantly, control.

C. FOUR DIMENSIONS OF DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Political theorist Mark E. Warren is the latest in a long list of scholars to examine ways in which participation in organizations may affect the quality of community life. In a lecture at
Rutgers University-Camden, and in a new book to be published by the Princeton University Press later this year, Warren (2000) asserts that participation in community associations varies importantly in four major ways. Warren identifies these dimensions as 1) the medium of production, 2) the voluntariness of the association, 3) the vestedness of the association, and 4) the goods and effects provided by participation in associations.

By "medium of production", Warren is simply saying that groups have different purposes. Some are primarily oriented toward bringing people together to enjoy each other's company (social organizations), while others direct their aims toward advancing community interests (political organizations) or to seek to enhance their own income or wealth (economic organizations). It is important to know what kind of group we are dealing with in understanding the urban community.

By the "voluntariness of association", Warren identifies the importance of rules and procedures by which individuals join and leave groups. Of particular importance here are the consequences for an individual of "exiting" from a group. The costs of exit from a family, for example, tend to be high, both in terms of psychological stress and economic obligation. It is somewhat less costly a process to exit from a church or other faith-based organization. And it is often quite easy to discontinue membership in a national organization, especially when the membership simply consists of an annual renewal. Additionally, it is important to think about the costs of exiting an urban community in which one lives: selling a house is often a difficult and economically unrewarding process, and leaving a network of neighbors and kin is often traumatic.

By "vestedness of association," Warren is getting at the relation of the group to larger systems of power in society. A vested association may be supported by city or state government (in the form of grants or contracts, for example), while a non-vested association tends to be independent of such support, and therefore, more likely to take stands in opposition to established governmental or corporate policies and organizations.

Finally, Warren discusses the "constitutive goods" provided to members of associations. These are the gains individuals who are active members of groups are able to receive, and Warren identifies six major types of these goods:

1) Status, or prestige in the opinion of others
2) Interpersonal identity, or a sense of self-worth as a member of the group
3) Individual material, as in increased income from welfare or a family business
4) Exclusive group identity, as pride in one's racial, ethnic, or religious tradition
5) Inclusive social, as in knowledge derived from participating in a school or cultural group
6) Public material, as in the form of visible neighborhood improvements to parks or in the quality of social and police services.
In the course of our research, we have sought to apply Warren’s distinctions to the groups we have identified for study. It is our sense that if we understand an organization’s purpose, voluntariness, vestedness, and constitutive goods, we will have gone a long way toward assessing the degree to which it can assist community residents in making their neighborhood a vital and vibrant place to live. But that goal requires that larger systems of political and economic power can be harnessed to work with, and for, the neighborhood. And in Camden on the cusp of the 21st century, these larger systems are reeling, both in the face of their own internal disarray and their abandonment by even larger societal forces which play upon them. Contemporary Camden finds itself nested in decline and decay, grasping at a set of uncertain resources in a desperate effort to create stability within its neighborhood structure.

II. THE RESEARCH SETTING: CAMDEN, NESTED IN DECLINE AND DECAY

A. TWENTIETH CENTURY CAMDEN: RISE AND FALL

1. SUBURBANIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

Camden has experienced a breathtaking transformation over the past fifty years. The historian Howard Gillette (2000, 9) describes the magnitude of the change:

> Once a stable working city, Camden lost in the space of one generation the great extent of its industrial base. The loss of business was accompanied by the out migration of the families who had once manned the factories. Their places were taken by others seeking opportunity, but finding gainful employment hard to come by. A concentration of poverty heightened the exodus until as much as a third of Camden’s properties had been abandoned, many of them in such advanced stages of decay as to be no longer fit for use.

Camden’s population fell by 33% between 1950 and 2000; many of its civic organizations and churches moved to the suburbs; and its great factories cut back their scale of operations and ultimately closed their doors. Most dramatic was New York Ship, which employed 47,000 workers in 1943 and shut down operations in 1967, dismissing its last 2400 employees (Gillette, 2000: 11).

The hollowing out of Camden’s working-class population and the industrial base which supported that population was accompanied by a dramatic shift in the racial and ethnic composition of the city. While most of the City’s population was white in 1950, by the end of the century over half the population was African-American, and another quarter were Hispanic in racial identification. Urban riots exploded in the late 1960s and early 1970s, further adding to the perception that Camden was a deeply divided and troubled city.
2. THE FAILURE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

The political history of late 20th century Camden rivals that of any city in the world in terms of political mediocrity and corruption. Only one mayor of distinction has been elected since 1970, and three of the five incumbents during that period have been indicted for significant criminal offenses. Two were convicted and jailed, and a third, the present incumbent, has been accused of far more serious crimes than any of his predecessors, and awaits trial.

Within the city of Camden, there is no steady or stable focus for leadership and direction. The charter of the city defines weak powers for the Mayor, who must rely on a majority within City Council to make major appointments and policy decisions. Mayors who have sought to assert strong leadership within the past thirty years have, with only one exception, been detoured into the morass of corruption and decay.

Governing Camden may be seen as a process of juggling four different balls, each of which represents a system of entrenched power and privilege:

♦ One ball involves the city's "permanent government" of employees protected by civil service provisions, ensconced within the various departments of housing, licenses, and public safety, etc.

♦ A second circle contains the powerful Camden County Democratic Party, replete with an armada of construction, insurance, and real estate interests—all willing to play "rainmaker" roles when new projects are planned within the City. Beyond these politically dependent business interests, the remnants of a formerly strong industrial base are found, along with a set of typically marginal small business enterprises.

♦ A third circle involves a strong set of nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations within the city, within which are included a large number of churches and other faith-based organizations, the urban campus of Rutgers—The State University, and a few strong civic organizations like the Cooper Ferry Development Association. These organizations have only infrequently demonstrated an ability to cooperate productively with each other in addressing the needs of neighborhoods or the City at large.

♦ A fourth set of actors, increasingly strong as the economic and political strength of the city declines, involves the State government of New Jersey, increasingly the funder and regulator of city administration, and a variety of federal agencies directly and indirectly involved in programs of urban development and policy.

The Camden vote, until two decades ago a potent force representing 25% of all the votes in the county, has now shrunk from 38,000 per general election to 11,000, while Camden's population has dwindled by one-third. Nonetheless Camden remains of interest to urban
contractors, with ground broken for a minor league baseball stadium, a major entertainment complex, and a variety of ancillary businesses and projects.

In the view of Congressman Rob Andrews, himself a former County Freeholder and protégé of former Governor Jim Florio, Camden would greatly benefit by an exercise of far-sighted executive leadership that succeeded in keeping the four balls of administration, county power, NGOs, and state government in play. At present, however, these disparate forces bounce in a seemingly random process across the city’s bleak landscape. Whatever is accomplished in Camden is often left to organizational forces focusing on its neighborhoods, and it is to that arena that our analysis now turns. We begin with an analysis of Fairview, and then turn to Fettersville.

III. ASSOCIATIONAL ASSETS IN FAIRVIEW AND FETTERSVILLE: RESULTS OF A CIVIL SOCIETY CENSUS

A. FAIRVIEW

1. STRUCTURE AND TRADITION IN AN URBAN VILLAGE

Fairview, a designed community at the southern edge of Camden, presents itself to the visitor as a special place. Indeed, as planning historian Michael Lang has observed, “it is usually considered the best of all the war time (World War I) housing developments.” Built to house shipyard workers, it embodies the vision of British town planner John Ruskin, among others, in its effort to create a harmonious urban community.

Originally named “Yorkship Village”, Fairview was built with over 1500 residential units. Its designer has articulated the initial vision which guided the development of this worker’s neighborhood: “to afford the physical plant where the worker might quietly and in comfort discuss among his fellows the problems which affect him, thus developing a cooperation, a unity, and a community of spirit between himself and fellow workers” (Electus Litchfield, quoted in Lang, 1999: 146).

The focus of the design is on a village green, which, Lang observes (Ibid.) “is surrounded by a series of concentric curvilinear roads in addition to radial roads and footpaths which extend out from it.” The green is surrounded on two sides “by attractive low rise apartment houses which provide a strong sense of enclosure. Churches, the library, the public meeting hall, and the school were located off the central green, but on the several greenswards that radiate outward from it. This diversity of land uses and functions ensures that the village green serves as a community focal point throughout the day and into the night. People work,
shop, and socialize in and around this organic urban space. It is a close knit neighborhood where everybody looks out for one another.”

By the year 2000, Fairview had entered into the ninth decade of its existence. The neighborhood was placed on the Federal and State historic registers in 1974, and was designated as a Historic District of Camden City in 1995. But as Lang observes, in Fairview “all is not as it could have been” (1999: 152). Our research identified fissures beginning to open along the familiar urban lines of poverty, race, crime, and physical decay. Fairview in the year 2000 was a neighborhood challenged by a variety of forces, both external and internal, that would test its ability to thrive into the century ahead.

2. CHANGE AND CHALLENGE IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

a. Socio-economic Change and Suburban Outflow

For the first 60 years of its existence, Fairview represented the kind of urban community sociologists have come to call an “urban village” (Cf. Gans, 1962). That is, it is home to a relatively homogeneous population of white families whose breadwinners were employed in industrial work. By 1990, it had become apparent that Fairview’s population was becoming more diverse: less white, less working class, less composed of families in their child-raising years; more African-American and Hispanic, more lower income, and more characterized by the elderly and the very young. African-Americans had become 7% of Fairview’s population by 1990, and their numbers rose to 19% by 1998. Hispanics also began to move into Fairview: 4% by 1990 and 13% by 1998.

Data collected by the Fairview Historic Society Neighborhood Preservation Program (1999: 13-14) indicates that in 1990, one in five of Fairview’s residents reported an income 50% below the county’s median income. By 1998 that number had risen to 40%. In 1990, over two in five of Fairview’s residents earned more than the county median income; by 1998 that number had fallen to 19%. Despite these worsening economic prospects, 78% of Fairview’s residents owned the home they lived in, the remaining 22% being renters. The value of those homes, however, had ceased to appreciate in value. In the mid-1980s, housing values had risen to an average in the mid-50,000 dollar range; by 1997 the average price of a Fairview home had fallen to the lower $40,000 level. A local realtor estimated that by mid-2000 over 100 homes were for sale in the neighborhood, a number twice the level realtors would expect in a stable neighborhood, but half the peak reached a few years previously.

b. A Community in Racial and Ethnic Transition
Two of the junior authors of this paper are former residents of Fairview. Brennan lived in the community for several decades, and continues to remain close to the structure of its life. Wallace lived in a rented room there during his sophomore year at Rutgers. And Cisse has explored the community from an anthropological perspective. The following three sections recount their individual observations of aspects of the transition of Fairview’s life.

The Closing of St. Joan of Arc, as seen by Suzanne Brennan

St. Joan of Arc Parish came into existence on September 12, 1920, when the first mass was said in a temporary church structure on the corner of Collings Road and Mt. Ephraim Ave. This would continue until 1923, when a building that housed both the church on the main floor, and the school on the top floor was erected on a triangular piece of property on Alabama and Collings Road in Fairview. In 1951, a new church was built across the street, and the church and school were now separate buildings.

As far back as I can remember, St. Joan of Arc Parish was one of the cornerstones of the Fairview community. Going to church as a young child, I remember the church was always crowded, and I thought everyone in Fairview was Catholic. In actuality, it was the largest denomination in the community, and I believe, it still is.

Over the years, as the neighborhood has changed, so has the attendance and participation at the church. St. Joan of Arc has always had a large list of church-sponsored organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, the Blessed Virgin Sodality, the Parish Council, etc. As the older population in Fairview has died off or the younger families have moved away, these organizations have either ceased to exist, or have very few members. Currently, the church has 530 families in the parish, and only 13 children from the parish attend the school.

When St. Joan of Arc School was separated from the church in 1951, after renovations to the building, the new school opened in 1954, it now went to the 8th grade, and the enrollment almost doubled, from 225 pupils to about 400. The next several decades were the “heyday” of the school and the church. Fairview’s population was exploding with the birth of many children and the church and school flourished. Each classroom had over 40 students, to the point they were very crowded. The families were expected to participate in all functions of the church and school and attendance at Sunday Mass was mandatory.

In the late 1970’s, a change began to appear in our community. Some families were moving out, in part because the kids were growing up, and they couldn’t afford to send their kids to Camden Catholic High School, so they needed to move to an area that had a public high school suitable for them. The enrollment in St. Joan of Arc continued to decline through the 1980’s and into the 1990’s, as the Fairview community changed as well. As the parent of a child attending the school from 1988-1996, I was a member of both the school board and the vice-president and Secretary of the PTA board. As the
enrollment dropped, so did the parents level of participation in school and church activities. It became increasingly more difficult to get volunteers to help with school functions. As a result of declining enrollment it was necessary every year to raise the tuition rates as well, which forced more families to take their children out of the school.

Seeing this trend continue well after my daughter graduated in 1996, it was not a huge surprise to me to hear in the last several years of the possibility of the school being forced to closed due to the enrollment problem, and also the lack of parent participation. The PTA board was virtually disbanded in the last several years, and the decision was made to stop fund-raising, which was always a critical part of our job on the board. The parents had to pay an activity fee, which many did not want to do. The problems at the school continue to this day, and when the article on the possible closing of St. Joan of Arc appeared in the Courier-Post on March 4th, 2000, it didn’t come as a complete surprise, but as a former parent and parishioner for many years, it left me with an overwhelming sadness in my heart. But the events that have transpired since the announcement was made, or even more puzzling to me.

When I first read the article, I called many old friends whose children had attended St. Joan of Arc School. All of them were saddened and hoped the diocese they would reconsider. We all thought that the parents of the currently enrolled students would try to do something to save the school, but that isn’t going to happen. There was a meeting between the Pastor of the church, Fr. Bill Pierce, and the parents to discuss the closing, and although I was told that several parents expressed interest in trying to do something, the majority were just resigned to the fact that the decision was made, and they were more concerned with fighting to keep that spirit alive, but unless the new residents are willing to become more involved with their community, these same things will keep happening.

Creating patterns of associations among new black residents, as seen by Claude Wallace

In recent years Camden has received negative attention due to the city’s high drug and crime rate. Since Fairview is located outside of the city center, and is less accessible to drugs, some of the residents of Fairview go to Philadelphia and Camden to purchase drugs and come back to the area to sell them for profit. The elders and respected members of the Fairview community are upset at this activity taking place in their neighborhood and assert that it is the police’s responsibility to stop the growing problem before it grows out of control.

Fairview’s most popular hang-out place is the square, in which members of the community gather in groups on a daily basis. The square consists of a rectangular grassy field containing trees and benches. It is surrounded by several apartment complexes and a small business district. The popular landmark’s business district includes a two pharmacies, a deli, a Chinese food store, a mini market, a dollar store and a barbershop.

During the day, the square serves as the local meeting ground for children
attending Camden public schools. Children ranging from elementary to high school all seem to arrive at the square at approximately 3:30 P.M. Monday through Friday. As the children exit the busses, they began to gather in groups either on the benches in the square, or in front of the stores waiting for friends. On a normal day in the square, by 4:00 P.M. the area is usually filled with children’s voices and laughter as they discuss school, sports and video games. Other children group up and then begin walking home or to neighborhood jobs. All of the activities began to settle down around 6:00 P.M. when most of the younger children began to make their way home.

The daytime and afternoon activities on the square are extremely different from those that occur at night. Then, instead of young children occupying the area, the square is filled with drug dealers and buyers, each looking to buy or sell drugs. The dealers seek drug abusers who live in or around the Fairview area, incapable or unwilling to travel out of the neighborhood to purchase drugs at lower prices. The square has become known as the common area where the dealers and abusers usually meet and make their transaction. Usually, the dealer, either alone or in a group, stands around waiting for abusers to come and purchase drugs. When the abuser is spotted there is usually a brief conversation dealing with the quantity of drugs, and then the transaction takes place. In other, less fortunate situations, dealers purchase large amounts drugs, and then give them out to young children from the neighborhood to distribute and sell. The adolescents thereby earn a small profit, while the supplier collects the greater part of the spoils.

Residents of the neighborhood express considerable anger that these types of negative activities going on in their community. Many of Fairview’s long term residents blame rising drug trade and increase in loitering in the square to the increase of “Section 8” residents in Fairview. They argue that the community should only consist of working families, noting that unemployment affects both individuals and the community as a whole. Others say that it is up to the Camden police to stop the illegal activity. There was a mini-police station open 24 hours a day in the square, but now it’s been closed and boarded up. Some members of the community assert that the closing of this station resulted in an increase in the local drug trade.

Out of all the solutions that one may be able suggest, I feel that there is a definite need for community based organization which attract all ages and all types of people. Out of Fairview’s six community organizations, only two provide after school programs in which students can go for tutoring and help with their homework. Children in grades 1-8 can definitely benefit from these programs, but the big question is: What about all the other children, teenagers, and young adults in Fairview?

Fairview is a diverse community. Schools will have to re-educate younger children who feel that selling drugs is an acceptable occupation and business. Stores should try to combine ideas with community organizers to build some type of community growth meetings and activities. The abusers should be counseled according to how severe their problem is. If we get the abusers in the right state of mind the dealers would have no one to sell their product to, and therefore will either stop selling, or move to another area. This type of activity has to stop before it becomes out of hand.

Since I have been visiting the Fairview area, I’ve noticed two community events that
have taken place in the Square. On Halloween there was a parade held for little children in the area to receive candy, and show off their costumes. I also noticed a gospel concert held in the square one afternoon. I feel that these types of activities are necessary in the neighborhood to gain some type of unity, and to let children know that the citizens of the neighborhood do care about their future.

Newcomers in Fairview, by Twana Cisse

I interviewed a man of Hispanic background, approximately 40 years of age. He worked for the city, and has owned a home in Fairview for the past seven years. He told a tale of slow decline in the community. The problem, he said, was caused by “Section 8 renters” who were not keeping their apartments and houses neat and proper. The mothers he described were mostly black, young, and had babies without their fathers being around. He said that the kids, trash, and lack of personal supervision were the main problems in the community.

I agreed with him that the breakdown of the family was directly related to a lack of jobs for men and the increase of teenage pregnancy. We both agreed that there were no easy answers to solve these complex problems. He made it clear to me that he would soon be putting up a “for sale” sign in front of his small but well-kept house.

I suggested that he stay and fight by joining a community group of some kind. He angrily told me that the last group he joined was a neighborhood town watch, and the police openly refused to help assist the group when it came time to legally stop the young drug dealers. So he said he walked out.

He recounted that at night the drug dealers come onto his porch and hide the drugs within the small plants he was cultivating in his front yard. I told him I understood how frustrating all of that was but that to simply give up was surely not the answer. Then he told me two interesting things: First, that he was happy that race was not an issue in Fairview; and second, that in the all-black neighborhood of Parkside the community was drug-free and the homes well kept. He asked: What is their secret?

Later, I approached a 29-year-old African-American female for an interview, and determined that she was single and a property renter in Fairview. She told me that she was the mother of one child, and had lived in Section 8 housing for the past two years.

She described her concerns: the rise in crime, the lack of a police presence to stop the young drug dealers, and the absence of a strong and viable neighborhood organization. She said she did not belong to any community organizations or clubs, nor had she heard of any meetings of groups seeking to make a difference in the community. “I really do not know anyone who cares about the block I lived on”, she observed.

With some reluctance, she added that some of the homeowners were at times rude to Section 8 renters such as herself. “They do not like those of us who receive some type of help from welfare, public assistance, or subsidized housing because we are not
homeowners. But some of us work and pay taxes.”

She continued: “The homeowners say we don’t keep the neighborhood clean. They say we are all lazy and we like to sit at home doing nothing but watching television. Well! I am here to tell you that it is not true. I clean my house and the outside of my front steps. Some of my friends keep their small apartments very nice. If you went inside their homes and apartments, you would think you were inside a house of a person who lived in Cherry Hill.”

My respondent then described the part-time job she holds in a clothing store in downtown Camden. “The only welfare I get is help with medical assistance and my housing rent. I struggle with day care costs and I get very little help from my child’s father because he stays out of work so damn much.”

The conversation then turned to the lure of drug money and the problems involved in caring for children. “Some parents are trying to do the best they can with what little they have to work with. Today some kids are just angry and really don’t know what to do with their anger. You know what I am saying. What we need is a little bit of help!”

My respondent then articulated the values sociologist Elijah Anderson (1999) finds deeply engrained in the black community, those of living a “decent” life: “Most of my girlfriends are on welfare, and live in Section 8 housing, but they also work part-time and some even go to school on the weekend and sometimes a night. We would like to get a better job in the future and make more money for the sake of our children. Why shouldn’t we have the right to one day buy a home and clean up our credit? Just because we are poor people, some people treat us as if we are different. We have the same dreams and goals like everybody else. What makes us different anyhow? Besides, everybody needs a place to live.”

I asked my respondent if in the future she would consider, along with some of her friends, starting a community group of some kind to help solve the problems of her neighborhood. She smiled and said, “Yes, of course.”

3. ASSETS AND ORGANIZATION

a. Fairview’s Civil Society

As part of our civil society census in Fairview, we conducted two community surveys, one of individuals and the other searching groups. Our individual survey was of the “button-hole” variety, interviewing individuals on the square one weekday afternoon in April. Thirty individuals were interviewed, and nine of them reported being actively involved in a neighborhood organization or association. Thus our survey was neither random nor statistically significant, but the results are striking nonetheless.
When our respondents were divided into groups by age and race, a dramatic pattern emerged. The 13 white respondents, all adults, reported a total of 13 group affiliations in the neighborhood. The 16 minority respondents, half aged 21 and under and half adults over 21, reported a grand total of two group affiliations (both among adults). Fairview’s civil society, it appeared from this survey, had yet to reach out to include its newest in-migrants.

The limited nature of Fairview’s associational life was also indicated by our survey of associations. Kretzmann and McKnight (2000) identify 25 types of organizations and associations that are often found within urban neighborhoods and communities. Our survey of Fairview located seventeen active associations within nine of these associational categories.

The focal point in Fairview’s associational life is the Fairview Historic Society. With a membership of 75, the Society’s Executive Board and its general membership each meet monthly in an unpretentious but spacious building, formerly the garage and headquarters of the 14th Ward Ambulance Association, that has served as its headquarters, museum, and meeting hall since 1995. The society was founded in 1987 and received its tax-exempt standing from the IRS in 1993. Its regular activities include publishing a monthly newsletter, providing an annual set of garden and holiday decoration awards, holding a series of craft and art fairs, and presenting a set of annual awards to 8th grade graduates.

The Fairview Historic Society, in recent years, has become vested in the state-funded Neighborhood Preservation Program (NPP). The NPP coordinator makes grants available for the rehabilitation of single family owner-occupied homes and rental units to eligible property owners in the neighborhood. Program assistance takes the form of grants, which do not have to be paid back if the property is held for five years or more. The NPP coordinator also serves as the principal staffer of the Fairview Historic Society.

In 1997, the city of Camden was awarded a state contract under the Neighborhood Preservation Program, which is administered by the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. This statewide program aims to assist distressed areas in making improvements to help stabilize the quality of life and improve their housing stock. In Fairview, the Historical Society was selected as the program’s agent, paying contractors for work completed on homes, and then billing the state through a city office.

The main function of this program in Fairview is to bring existing homes in the neighborhood up to code, providing repairs and upgrades to roofing, plumbing, windows, heaters, etc. Since Fairview is a historic district, all improvements done to these homes must receive approval from the Camden City Historic Review Committee.

The NPP serves as liaison between homeowner and contractor. The homeowner submits an application to the NPP for repairs needed on their homes; if approved, gets a list of contractors in their area to contact for the presentation of several bids. These bids, in turn, are submitted to the NPP, and the lowest bid is awarded the contract to do the work. After historic review approval, the contract between the homeowner and the contractor is drawn up with the NPP, which puts a lien on the property until the residency requirements are fulfilled. There are several types of NPP grants available, each with a different set of criteria to meet.
## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN FAIRVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th># MEMBERS</th>
<th>LEVEL OF ACTIVITY</th>
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<tr>
<td>ARTISTIC</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHARITABLE</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHURCH</td>
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<td>Catholic;</td>
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<td>Active</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lutheran;</td>
<td>530 families</td>
<td>Closed, but may reopen</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodist</td>
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<td>Active</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIVIC</td>
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<tr>
<td>COLLECTORS</td>
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<td>COMMUNITY SUPPORT</td>
<td>Fairview Historic Society</td>
<td>70</td>
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<td>LOCAL GOVT</td>
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<td>IC-AC</td>
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<td>1st Ward Republican Club</td>
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<td>Little League; Football</td>
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<td>YOUTH</td>
<td>Yorkshire After School Program;</td>
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<td>Brownies;</td>
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<td>Girl Scouts;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big Brothers</td>
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In Fairview, the NPP program is being executed in four phases. Phase 1 is nearing completion, with over 30 homes given grants for repairs and renovations. No remodeling work is allowed, only genuine repair work to major structural areas, such as the roof, plumbing, new heater, etc. Most grants include at least some external work to the homes.

The Fairview Neighborhood Preservation Program, while not specifically designed for the preservation of historic structures, accomplishes that purpose in the neighborhood by assisting residents to do what is necessary to maintain their historic homes. Phase 2 is getting underway, with over 40 applications already received by the NPP to date. All four phases are expected to be completed by the end of the contract in the year 2004.

The senior author of this paper observed the regular monthly meetings of the Executive Board of the Society throughout the first six months of the year 2000. The meetings were well attended, with almost all of the 14 members in attendance. The agenda regularly included a report by the NPP director of her activities over the past month, a detailed financial accounting of moneys received and expended, and discussion of a number of neighborhood issues. Chaired by the society’s president, the owner of a pharmacy on the square, the meetings were typically orderly (though once in a while a bit raucous), good-humored (even in times of conflict), and productive.

An issue of concern during the period of study involved the City’s authorization of the construction of a new parking space in the front yard of an Hispanic resident who regularly
parked three cabs from his taxi company near his home. Our field notes indicate the content and tenor of the discussion:

Discussion switches to the matter of a driveway is presently under construction with city approval to assist a Hispanic taxi owner to park his three cabs. It is noted that approval was given by a city official (sidewalk inspector) of Hispanic background. TT observes that certain city officials “act dumb” and “don’t speak English” when decisions are questioned. T suggests writing a formal letter of protest. Discussion warns of the consequences of this becoming seen as a racial incident, but the group is clear: the requirement for historical review has not been met.

Chairman A suggests a demonstration, with TV on hand, when the driveway is poured. J suggests a court process, noting that there are other variant constructions under way in the neighborhood, such as putting bars on windows. T notes that a “No Parking” sign has just been put up near the corner (Alabama, Argus, Octagon) to permit the difficult turns at that complex crossing. J notes that there is another driveway in the area, just before the Morgan Village Bridge. A suggestion is made for parking permits. A reminds the group: “The village was made for no cars.”

This discussion is notable on a number of dimensions: 1) It focuses on a genuine problem and advances both an understanding of it and the possibility of resolving it; 2) It demonstrates a considerable sophistication regarding the political context, including the potential for inter-ethnic conflict, inherent in the issue; and 3) It keeps the central interest of the group, in protecting the historical assets of its community, clearly in view.

During the period of the study, the Fairview Historic Society undertook the organization of a multi-racial residents’ committee, which began to meet monthly in February, 2000. Their main concerns have been: 1) the need for increased police patrol in Fairview; 2) front yard parking; 3) curfew; 4) curbing and leashing dogs; 5) street-sweeping; 6) paving of sidewalks, streets and common areas; 7) clean-ups; 8) establishment of a welcome wagon; 9) increased recycling; 10) increased activities and facilities for children; 11) organization of a teen dance; 12) publication of a list of community “Do’s and Don’ts” (see below).
From the Residents’ Association of Fairview (May 2000): “Here’s a list of Do’s and Don’t that will help make our community and environment pleasant for everyone.”

DON’Ts

- Park your car on the sidewalk; it is for pedestrians and your car will be ticketed.
- Allow your pets to trespass onto other’s property.
- Allow distribution of drugs in your neighborhood; immediately call the police.
- Harass your neighbors; we all live here so try to get along.
- Address concerns in a negative manner, do it in a civilized way; if being civilized does not work, the legal system will.
- Argue with children; address their parents to discipline them.
- Play your music loud; respect your neighbor’s silence.
- Put trash out before pick up day & keep trash lids and bags secure.
- Store or place interior furniture on front or back porch; it’s a fire hazard!
- Let your children loiter and vandalize neighborhood property.
- Use foul and offensive language in public.

DO’s

- Place dogs on leashes; this will prevent people and other animals from injury.
- Pick up mess left behind from your pets when taking them for a walk.
- Be mindful that everyone has not lived in a clean environment; encourage them by teaching them to respect their community.
- Take pride in your home and keep your yard clean and healthy.
- Store trash containers in your yard, not in alley or on sidewalk.
- Recycle; it’s the state law.
- Respect and treat others the way in which you want to be treated.
- Become more involved in your neighborhood, volunteer for community projects & get your children to join in too!
- Encourage our youths to be positive by being a good influence and respecting them.
- Respect your police officers; they are here to keep your neighborhood safe.

Working together will keep our community productive and positive.
b. Political representation in Fairview

Fairview’s principal political representative is the city councilman the neighborhood has long been able to elect from among their own. While the First councilmanic district includes several other areas to the North along the Delaware River largely inhabited by minority residents (including Fettersville), the Fairview vote, now about 40% within the district, has consistently been able to prevail. In the most recent councilmanic election, newly appointed councilman Michael McGuire won his seat by only 40 votes over long-time Cooper Grant activist Frank Fulbrook.

McGuire grew up in Fairview, and his father still runs the family’s modest deli on Yorkshire Square. A large man who makes his living as a housing inspector with the State, McGuire throws himself into his political role with a great deal of energy. Following a long tradition of working class political representation, he relates to his constituents one-on-one, listening to their grievances and seeking to address their concerns. He is frequently seen chasing drug dealers out of the square or off the corners of his neighborhood, and his political style appeals to those who prefer their politics personal and unmediated by community or neighborhood organization.

McGuire sees Fairview as a neighborhood in transition, and expresses the hope that he might be able to contribute to the stabilization of the ongoing racial and ethnic changes currently at play. Fairview, he asserts, is a town built by working people, and if it is to survive, will need to remain that way. New nonwhite residents should be welcomed, but only if they are working people. McGuire directly addresses the widely neighborhood concern (See the interviews, above, on “Newcomers in Fairview) that “Section 8s” (residents whose rents are sustained by subsidies provided under the HUD section of that number) are leading to an increase of socially undesirable new residents. He articulates the populist’s wish that even a fast-food worker should be able to buy a house in Fairview, but that those who do not choose to find work should choose to live elsewhere.

Whether Fairview can reduce and restrict its Section 8 population raises, of course, a hornet’s nest of legal, economic, sociological, cultural, and political concerns. McGuire aims, by convening a series of town meetings with the largely black Morgan Village neighborhood to Fairview’s north, to focus community concern on this issue. With an extension of tracking, he asserts, the schools (“not that bad”) could stabilize their enrollment balances. And, aware of the disappearance of individuals of working age from both Fairview and the city at large, he articulates a vision in which Fairview recreates itself as a 21st century urban village, multi-ethnic and age-balanced, in which each household contains adults who are able and willing to find employment. It is a vision that merits consideration in an age in which so many more timid visions have proven unable to meet the stern realities of urban change and decline.
B. FETTERSVILLE

1. DISCOVERING A SUBMERGED HISTORY

The Fettersville neighborhood of Camden was developed by Richard Fetter, a prominent citizen of Camden. Fetter, a Quaker, was a political and civic leader light years ahead of his time in his commitment to address the needs of his fellow citizens. In 1833, Fetter purchased land from Charity and Grace Kaighn between Line and Cherry Streets and Third Street and the Delaware River and laid it out into lots offered for sale at low rates and easy terms. Among the buyers of these plots were a number of freed slaves, several of whom later joined the ranks of the city's most respected residents. The remarkable past of this area reveals a place of community pride and authentic historical wonder that is today in an active process of rediscovery. Although not much of the physical fabric of Fettersville remains, a group of its citizens are seeking to base the future of the neighborhood on the principles and traditions that shaped its past.

2. HOPE AND DESPAIR

The contemporary neighborhood known as Fettersville consists of about half of Camden City's Bergen Square census tract. The boundaries of the neighborhood run from Line Street to Atlantic Avenue and from Broadway, west to the Delaware River. These approximately eighty square blocks include a population that is 65% African-American, with most of the remaining population Hispanic. The layout of this community is split between residential and industrial uses, which has created a serious land use dilemma. The residents of this neighborhood find themselves immersed in an area characterized by abandoned buildings, trash-filled vacant lots, open-air drug markets, various industrial wastes and fumes.

Fettersville contains one of the largest numbers of abandoned buildings in the entire city of Camden. Until the recent placement of a new water main in the area, this neighborhood had not experienced any noticeable development investment in nearly thirty-five years. Furthermore, the new water main required the tearing up of major city blocks running through the community, which the city has yet to repave. The abandoned building close-up program is no longer implemented in the community, which has encouraged problems of squatters and drug markets. Keeping in mind that these abandoned structures are located directly adjacent to occupied homes, concerns over sanitation and security plague the area. This neighborhood has become a haven for the mentally ill and homeless of the city, while the children who reside in this area have few places to go. Fettersville lacks any public park or open green space in all of its eighty square blocks. In fact the children of this neighborhood are faced with dangerous elements every day, such as the huge open ditch at the corner of Third and Cherry Streets.

The current reality of industrial uses adjacent to residential uses has caused major problems in the community. Fettersville contains several brownfield areas within its boundaries. Industrial companies which have gone bankrupt or simply moved out of the area
have left behind contaminated sites. Also, in recent years there has been a massive encroachment of quasi-public corporations, such as the South Jersey Port Corporation, gobbling up vacant and abandoned property in the neighborhood for non-residential uses. Meanwhile, Fettersville has not experienced the development of any new housing in nearly eighty years and very little renovation has been done on existing structures. This neighborhood has become host primarily to a population of low-income, elderly, disabled, unemployed, and underemployed persons. A windshield survey conducted by two members of our team indicates the various uses of land and property within the area.

A Windshield Survey of Fettersville, by Leroy Gould and Meghan Murtha

-400 block of Line Street at intersection with West, Volunteers of America, residential housing (two-story structure with two separate buildings and quite a few apartments)

-715 Broadway, community center sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, City of Camden

-Intersection of Broadway and Klein, Head Start sponsored by Camden County OEO, Child Development Center Administrative Offices

-219 Pine Street, Greater El Bethel Church of Christ, Pastor T. Tyrone Trippett Sr. (966-0464)

-261 Spruce Street, Macedonia AME Church, Reverend Pastor Miller

-300 Block of Spruce Street, Biasi and Sons Roofing Company, adjacent to their building is a play area with a bocci court

-At Corner of Spruce (Historical Macedonia AME Avenue) and Fourth, Iglesia Pentecostal Mirantha Rosa De Sarev Church (storefront), Pastor Reverend Roberto Lopez

-Across the street also at Fourth and Spruce is Norma's Grocery Store

-434 Spruce Street, Bright Star Christian Center, Reverend Pastor Simon McCoy

-In the same complex as Bright Star is the Iglesia Pentecostal Rios de Aguavivia Incorporated, Pastor de Jesus (Evangelistic Center)

-436 Spruce, Bright Star Christian Center Inc., Bright Star Housing and Community Development Corporation (757-9097)

-Corner of Broadway and Spruce St., Off-Broadway Lounge, a supportive community business that donates food to many neighborhood functions

-Corner of Fifth St. and Roma Gonzalez, Giambrone Brothers, meat store and delicatessen (owners are very active members of Mt. Carmel Church)

-300 block of Cherry St., El Shaddia Christian Day Care Center (757-0175)

-344 Cherry St., Mi Heredad Family Day Care Center, Eiza Santos, director (365-0454)
419 Walnut Street, Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses

200 block of Chestnut St, smelting/recycling station that is contaminating both sides of the street

417 Chestnut St, Beautarama Unisex Hair Salon (964-1500)

425 Chestnut St, Chestnut Coal and Fuel Oil Company, they have moved to Pennsauken but have left there trash filled and contaminated sight behind

Corner of Kaighn and Broadway, McCrory Downtown Department Store, which is now an Asian owned Dollar Store

Historical businesses of Kaighn Ave. Harry’s Plumbing Supply and Henry’s Plumbing Supply are still here. They use most of the adjacent buildings for storage.

Next to Harry’s Plumbing Supply on the North side of Kaighn Avenue is City of Camden, Department of Human Services, Division of Facility Maintenance Office

431 Kaighn Avenue, Dr. Warren Ruben, podiatrist (964-0014)

Jacob Dental Center (964-1500)
Dr. Ruben, optometrist

427 Kaighn Avenue, a church, reverend Payne

410 Kaighn Avenue, Katz Paper Goods and Party Supply Store, been in existence for decades

At corner of Kaighn and Fourth Street, Camden County OEO, A. Wright Center, transitional housing

333 Kaighn Avenue, Elisa Wright Place, Child Care Center (964-0332), sponsored by Reverend Floyd Wright, Arnold Byrd, and Yvette Benton (Head Start Director)

325.5 Kaighn Avenue, store front church with no sign but on Sundays they do have services

278 Kaighn Avenue, Miracle of Sharing Neighborhood Center, three-story building with slate roof and a lot of grounds

400 block of Liberty Street, New Freedom Full Gospel Church, founder and Pastor T. D. Brown

335 Liberty Street, Liberty Christ Church, Pastor H. L. Moses (store front/row house church)

253 Mechanic St. at the corner of Mechanic and Locust Streets, Holy Trinity Missionary Baptist Church, Reverend Pastor Richard Grace

Corner of Fourth and Atlantic, Atlantic Avenue Meats (365-5466), delicatessen and take-out

Corner of Third and Atlantic, Volunteers of America of Delaware Valley, Elisa R. Wright Vision of Hope Center. food service preparation

Corner of Atlantic and Broadway, Zion Baptist Church
- 1400 block of Broadway and Mechanic, Post Office
- Across the street is the new Camden City Fire Department (Liberty Station)
- Corner of Liberty and Broadway, The Penn Fish Company
- Across the street, Tender Trap Bar
- Corner of Kaighn and Broadway, the downtown variety store and across the street is the famous Triangle Liquor Store
- 1100 block of Broadway, Pentecostal Church, an elaborate store front church
- Corner of Sycamore and Broadway, PNC Bank
- Broadway, Gold Star Shoe Repair, oldest store on Broadway
- 1114 Broadway, Camden Community Temple (store front church), Reverend Dorsey Saoultz
- Corner of Chestnut and Broadway, Reverend Fitten’s church
- Corner of Mount Vernon and Broadway, F. R. Grocery Store
- 938 Broadway, St. James Apostolic Temple, PAW Inc., Pastor Reverend Joseph Scott and assistant Pastor Ed Williams, Director of Planning for City of Camden
- 1014 Broadway, Dr. Harvey Benn, arthritis, and Dr. J Getson, chiropractic center
- Corner of Broadway and Newton Avenue, Crystal one-hour Cleaners
- 915 Broadway, United House of Prayer for All People, Pastor James Douglas
- Corner of Roma Gonzalez (Division St.) and Broadway, Yuk’s Chinese Food, open for over thirty years
- Corner of Line and Fifth St., Iglesia Pentecostal Puerta de Salvacion Church
- 812 Fifth Street, Robinson’s Barber Shop
- 906 Fifth Street, Little Lambs for Christ Day Care Center, a Christian day care center specializing in newborn’s to two-year-olds
- 924 Fifth Street, the Old Timers Club
- Corner of Mount Vernon and Fifth Street, Pilgrim Baptist Church, Reverend Pastor W.E. Whack
- Corner of Chestnut and Fourth Street, The Cotton Club, listed as a historical building
- 1000 block of Fourth Street, Baptist Temple Church, Pastor Cornell Williams
- Corner of Fourth Street and Walnut, May Funeral Home, Thomas May, director
Over the past half-century, neighborhood residents have failed to influence municipal planning within the city of Camden. Most recently, a range of nonprofit corporations have proposed and executed several projects involving the development of waterfront lands along the Delaware River. These plans have not brought any significant benefits to the residents of neighborhoods like Fettersville. But there remains in that community a beacon of hope that has shone since the development of this community by Richard Fetters. Contemporary visions being developed from within the neighborhood include the embracing of subcultures and the resolution of ethnic tolerance that could rebuild a sense of community pride. This neighborhood has discovered an opportunity to address its pressing current needs by reinventing its submerged past.

3. A CIVIL SOCIETY CENSUS OF FETTERSVILLE

Fettersville began its process of rediscovery in the face of a crumbling physical structure, a weakening economic base, and a set of organizational assets primarily consisting of a set of churches and other faith-based organizations. Our civil society census discovered active organizations within the community within eight of the 25 possible categories identified by Kretzman and McKnight (1993).

Traditional means of community organization within communities like Fettersville tend to be ineffective in the contemporary city. In Fettersville, a deep sense of distrust, both of established authority and of each other, characterizes many residents. Looking into the future a group of local residents and organizational leaders came to the realization that the implementation of state/government developed initiatives have failed to reach deeply into the community. The interaction among certain residents of the area gave rise to an emergent sense of community and the creation of a grassroots organization, a collaborative of local groups who took upon themselves the power of reinventing a community.

Ultimately, the Collaborative came into conflict with the entrenched interests of the strongest community-based organizations within the neighborhood—two of its churches.
Following upon a period of stalemate between the leadership of these churches, the Collaborative found itself in a process of substantial reorganization as of June, 2000.

During its brief one-year existence, the Fettersville Collaborative sought to act as a self-styled "celebration" of the meeting of minds, ideas, agendas, and even personalities within the community. The Collaborative organized itself in the face of the many difficulties and obstacles involved in democratic participation. It embraced its community because Fettersville’s residents have nowhere else to go, plagued as they are by handicaps of race, economics, education, and social fabric. The creation of a collaborative marked a sense of hope among a group of low-income urban residents that recognizes the strength of their ties to a community they cannot afford to leave. In that commitment, they were joined by others tied to community through ancestry and belief. Included in the Collaborative’s research and activity were several elderly residents, who remember a time when the social fabric was not so torn, and a set of church pastors, tied to the community by the assignment of their ministry. The rediscovered history of this urban space has sparked a resurgence of African-American history and tradition within this bleak Camden urbanscape.

The process within the Collaborative was a sometimes dynamic, and often turbulent, one. Meetings of the collaborative evinced the dynamics of group organizing in a raw and diverse urban context. The conflict that frequently arise among its members was often based in deeply held sentiments within various members of the collaborative. But the determination of this community to reinstate family history and community pride has revealed a remarkable power found in destroyed areas of urban America. The "end of the line" has stopped in this community at a place where communication and mutual partnership is almost mandatory.

The Fettersville Collaborative experienced a challenge to its viability during the study period (Spring 2000), when one of its constitutive members withdrew from participation in protest against what it perceived as inappropriate behavior on the part of representatives of another church. This withdrawal effectively stymied the collaborative from taking any action, as its by-laws require the active consent of all its members before any action can be taken. Considerable meeting time was consumed during the impasse period by repeated comments from the members whose behavior had been rendered suspect of "negativity". Finally, the executive of one of the church organizations announced his intention of dissolving the Collaborative upon taking his turn in the revolving presidency of the organization, and the Collaborative moved into a state of hibernation.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN FETTERSVILLE

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<th>NAME</th>
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<td>BUSINESS</td>
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<td>CHARITABLE</td>
<td>CHURCH</td>
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<td>Six traditional churches, six store-front churches and three other faith-based service organizations</td>
<td>Bright Star Housing</td>
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<td>Varies from very few to several hundred for each church</td>
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<td>Several churches with active CDCs and other planning/service programs</td>
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Conflict between members of the collaborative was not all that troubled the effort; occasional conflict within participating member organizations was also evident. At one point the executive of a participating organization openly withheld information from volunteer participants within his own organization, in effect protecting his organization from what might have been perceived as an untimely interest on the part of the collaborative. Shortly thereafter, this minister also withdrew his church from participation within the Collaborative.

The President of the Collaborative during this period, himself a member of the Rutgers study team, accommodated these various conflicts with considerable tolerance. In his view, the Collaborative's aim was to bring needed development to Fettersville, and if that development was at times a noisy and even sloppy process, it was a process leading to a worthy end.

From the theoretical point of view, the Collaborative is a “semi-voluntary” and “unvested” organization seeking to coordinate a set of more fully non-voluntary and vested organizations—churches, city departments, university, and the like. Difficulty of exit thus becomes a critical aspect for its successful functioning: if it is too easy to leave the organization, as Warren notes, only those who agree with each other will remain active participants (2000 forthcoming, p. 194). If the collaborative were to become a place in which differences in opinion are fully and frankly aired, it would need to become more like the churches, government offices, and schools from which its members are drawn: that is, an organization where there is a cost involved in leaving it.

In the meantime, Fettersville seems likely to remain a community most significantly organized by the fifteen faith-related organizations within its borders, whether acting individually or in coordination with each other. With the promise of state and federal funding for faith-based social service initiatives looming before them, these churches and other religious associations moved rapidly during the period of the study toward establishing themselves as fundable nonprofit organizations willing to provide a variety of social services to residents of the neighborhoods in which they are located. Six of these faith-based organizations occupy storefront locations within the community (It is estimated that Camden hosts 150 such churches city-wide.

With both presidential candidates Gore and Bush committed to supporting the funding of service programs by churches and other faith-based organizations, it is apparent that the Camden case deserves considerable attention. As the leading scholar of this movement, Ram Cnaan (1999: 210), observes, some, but certainly not all, religious organizations “actively support empowerment.” Cnaan adds: “When such a collective embraces a process of social change, it is already equipped with personal ties, basic resources, leadership skills, and a strong sense of virtue. Many religious groups, from congregations to denominations, have the capacity to assist in empowering the neediest members of society.”

It is interesting to reflect on the exit issue as it pertains to the residents of Fettersville, those in whose name the members of the collaborative are presumably acting. These residents have few options beyond Fettersville; for them exit is also a difficult process. Through the period of this study, the Collaborative failed to establish its power to “sign off” on the development plans of the separate churches and their community development corporations within that neighborhood. Its failure can be attributed, at least in part, to its inability to sustain
productive conflict among its members. Whether Fettersville will be able to contain the conflict within and among its organizations will test, in the days and months ahead, its hopes of ever facilitating social and economic development in a difficult and variegated urban environment.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A. HISTORY AS A COMMUNITY ASSET

Both the urban neighborhoods examined in this study, Fairview and Fettersville, face the urgent challenges of the ongoing American urban crisis. Yet both possess social, cultural, political, and economic assets that are commonly overlooked both by many urban scholars and policymakers. Many of these assets have been detailed and examined in other urban milieu by Kretzman and McKnight, and have been located in the neighborhoods we have studied as well. But one additional community asset, indeed a very central one, is strikingly evident in Fairview and Fettersville. This is the asset of neighborhood history, which figures importantly in both the narratives we have explored in our study.²

In Fettersville, neighborhood history means the process of discovering the previously hidden events involved in the founding and development of the community. As a community established by free blacks in the 1830s, and later as a stop on the Underground Railroad, the significance of this area might provide a source for community pride as well as a potential base for community social and economic development. Indeed, visions presently being refined by several churches within the area, visions nurtured by the Fettersville Collaborative during its brief existence, involve the building of housing and commercial developments linked to the themes of early settlement and Underground Railroad.

In Fairview as well, community history has emerged as an increasingly important asset. The establishment of the Fairview Historic Society in 1987 gave the factor both a name and an organization. Over the past decade, the research of planning historian Michael Lang is frequently cited within the community as indicating the unique nature of the neighborhood’s design and its particular importance within the history both of Camden city and the larger South Jersey area. Even more recently, the prominence of the “new urbanism”, featuring the importance of sidewalks, front porches, and alleys, has made it apparent that the very physical structure of Fairview embodies a tradition that many contemporary developers are eagerly recreating on an international scale.

Winning the legitimacy of professional historians to new historical discoveries is not an instant process, but it forms a central part of the asset development effort in the two

² A pioneering study of the role of history in a black urban neighborhood is presented by Boyd (2000) in her study of the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago. A full set of citations on urban tourism and historical rediscovery is also found in that article.
neighborhoods. Camden is fortunate to host an active and responsive County Historical Society, a city office of Historical Preservation, and two urban-focused departments (Urban Studies and History) at the local campus of Rutgers University. Each of these organizations is staffed by prominent and well-reputed historians and other social scientists. Their work has led to international recognition of the significance of Fairview (Cf. Lang, 1999) and currently is engaged in an assessment of Fettersonville’s claims to historical significance. This process of asset creation involves discovery, evaluation, and dissemination. Discovering and naming this process may indeed be the most important finding of the present research.

**B. TRAVALS OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESS**

The process of growing civil society in contemporary American society, strongly divided as it is on dimensions of class, race, gender, and residence, is not an easy one. Building community requires effective associations to represent community interests and enhance social capital among neighbors. But the task of organizing democratically within associations is one that faces many challenges. The difficulty of this effort is dramatically shown by our observations within both communities.

Looking at the associations we found in Fairview and Fettersonville in light of the four dimensions identified by Warren, and discussed above, we find:

1) Most associations in both neighborhoods work primarily in the social medium of reproduction, but their strong secondary focus is directed to the economic advance of their communities, primarily through action directed toward governmental agencies. Thus in Fairview the Historic Society directs its interests toward developing homeowner skills and enhancing the historic, and, it is assumed, economic value, of properties within the village. A primary means by which these ends are sought is through the linkage with state and nonprofit agencies. And, in Fettersonville, the major churches engage in the effort to create community development corporations which might provide the economic gains of employment, housing and enterprise to their immediate neighborhoods.

2) The degree to which the associations in the two neighborhoods are voluntary in their theory and practice is high, and is reflected in the ease of exit from most of the non-faith based organizations. Within the Fettersonville Collaborative, for example, the a major church simply ceased participating in attending meetings, thereby precipitating a constitutional crisis within the organization. Had the cost of exiting been higher for that church’s leadership, it would have been more difficult to simply walk away from an organization that required their consent to function. In Fairview, on the other hand, selective exit was occasionally employed by individual members as a means of reducing conflict, but the groups continued to meet with whichever members chose to participate. In both neighborhoods, most residents seemed to choose non-participation as a style of life, in effect exiting before they even entered from the associational life of their neighborhoods.
3) The issue of vestedness, or linkage to larger systems of economic or political power, presents itself in a fascinating manner in these two neighborhoods. The Fairview Historic Society finds itself considerably vested through its participation in the state’s Neighborhood Preservation Program. This program provides it with staff, financial resources, and the ability to advance its mission of maintaining the architecture and construction styles of the village. A consequence of this vesting involves a rather cautious orientation to conflict with established governmental structures, whether city or state, by the association. In Fetterville, on the other hand, it is the churches which tend to be vested in their larger organizational dioceses, and the community-based organizations, such as the Collaborative, which find themselves both more independent to act, but more dependent on the resources of the vested organizations for any sort of support they might be willing to provide. Poverty and powerlessness may provide motivation toward independent action, but limits its ability to execute and sustain such action.

4) Finally, as to the goods and effects provided by participation in associations, it is clear that the groups seek primarily to achieve both inclusive social (knowledge of their community’s past) and public material ends (neighborhood improvements or service enhancements), but that they also serve as important sources of interpersonal identity, and in some cases, personal status or prestige. Within the Fetterville Collaborative, for instance, the quality of historical research developed by grassroots members was overwhelming, well deserving the collegueship with professional historians that the group has come to expect. In Fairview, a similar linkage with academic scholars has been established regarding both the history and the current social concerns of the neighborhood.

C. ADDRESSING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In both the Fairview and Fetterville neighborhoods of Camden, the 21st century will bring enormous challenges. The long wave of economic decline that has plagued the city in the latter half of the 20th century shows little signs of weakening: political corruption, economic decline, family disorganization, and interracial conflicts continue to ravage the city and its people.

No neighborhood alone can pull itself up by its own bootstraps. If Fairview and Fetterville are to meet the needs of their residents in the years ahead, they will require the support of effective governmental action at the city, state, and federal levels as well as the working of a productive business and economic climate in the South Jersey region.

Just as neighborhoods require strong governmental and business climates in order to thrive, however, so do government and business rely on the health of neighborhoods to sustain the quality of democratic and business life. Vital local associations and other community-based organizations have important roles to play in assuring the quality of life in the contemporary metropolitan milieu.

In both Fairview and Fetterville, as we have seen in this study, groups of residents are active in such organizations at the Fairview Historic Society, the Fetterville Collaborative, and
numerous churches and other faith-based organizations. By working separately, and sometimes together, these individuals strive directly to face the challenges of their uncertain future. Recalling the courageous hopes of those who first settled their communities, they seek to confront the challenges of the present by recreating a sense of neighborhood appreciation and strength.

In this study we have documented these organizational efforts to strengthen community life in these two urban neighborhoods. We conclude our study with a set of questions directed to the leadership in each area.

To the neighborhood leaders in Fettersville, we ask:

♦ If your churches will be the prime forces in developing your community in the years ahead, will each be left to work alone on their separate tasks, or will a collaborative way be found to address the needs of the community as a whole?

♦ As the idea of “Fettersville” becomes more fully elaborated, and the history of the neighborhood more fully unearthed, how much beyond the immediate area of the Macedonian church will it take hold? In particular, will this history continue beyond the founding era, and reflect the contributions of Italian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans as well as those of the founding African-Americans?

To the neighborhood leaders in Fairview, we ask:

♦ Your neighborhood has considerable strengths in tradition and design, but it is not serving the needs of all its residents. Particularly young people, new residents, and a growing older population are not finding ways of participating actively within the community on issues that are of primary concern to them. Can you spark a rebirth of community association to address these various and special needs?

♦ In particular, the social isolation of new residents of minority backgrounds has been striking in our study. How will the Fairview community be able to welcome and incorporate these newest residents of your community, minority families of a variety of economic prospects, so that they can more fully contribute to the quality of life within your historic neighborhood?

These challenges of facing the two communities are formidable, but each community contains within itself a set of organizational and interpersonal assets. Primary among these assets is a vibrant and important historical experience, combined, at least in Fairview, with a unique and attractive planned and built environment. Each neighborhood possesses a set of institutions and organizations, each staffed by intelligent, committed, and effective community participants, that may be called upon to spearhead activities of growth and development.

Moreover, each neighborhood has access to a set of ancillary resources that may be cultivated from outside institutional resources. The State of New Jersey has been particularly supportive in Fairview, and also offers resources from faith-based initiatives that can be more fully developed in Fettersville. The City of Camden offers support to both these neighborhoods through its active support of historically significant areas. The larger structures of major churches found within the neighborhoods, and especially in Fettersville, can be called
upon for particular support and contributions. And the energies of Rutgers University students, faculty and administrators, as indicated by this report, stand ready to be called upon for continuing interest and facilitative support.

Grassroots democracy, it has been observed, is like Pandora’s Box. One does not know what will emerge when one opens it, but the results can be as fortunate as they are surprising. In the cases of Fairview and Fettersville, such boxes exist in the form of local associations dedicated to building a better future: they may even be extended if the energies of new resident forces are brought to bear. These new voices will need to be listened to, and organizational efforts will be required to coordinate their varying notes into a harmonious chorus. It will not be an easy process, but it will likely be a far better one than its major alternative: accepting a slow and continuing process of neighborhood decline and decay. There may never come a better time to mobilize neighborhood assets of Fairview and Fettersville.
REFERENCES


