

Philadelphia: The Birthplace of Mothers' Day

Few people realize that Philadelphia was the birthplace of Mothers' Day.

Anna Jarvis, the founder of Mothers' Day resided at 2031 North 12th Street in Philadelphia when she started the celebration to honor her mother and all mothers everywhere...

On May 10th, 1908, at the Bethany Temple Presbyterian Church, located at that time at 54th and Spruce Streets, Miss Jarvis was present for the first official Mothers' Day observance.

Several other churches in the area, as well as her mother's church in Grafton, West Virginia, also held special services on that day.

The following year, Miss Jarvis wrote to the pastor of Bethany Temple who had invited her to return for the second year in 1909. In it she replied,

“My Dear Mr. Ferry, I thank you for your letter of today. It would give me great pleasure to be with you next Sunday, but it does not seem, at present, possible. I shall never forget the beautiful service you had on our First Mothers' Day, and how much I welcomed you and your members as first friends of the new 'Holiday of the Heart and Home.' With friendly greetings to all, believe me, Cordially Yours, Anna Jarvis.”

This letter was printed in the Sunday Church Bulletin of the Bethany Temple Presbyterian Church on May 9th, 1909, a copy owned by the writer, who was the minister of the church 1956-1960. In the same bulletin, we read of the new custom to wear a white carnation to honor one's mother. In later years, the custom was to wear a red carnation if one's mother was living and a white one if she had died.

“This Sunday we celebrate Mothers' Day. Through the kindness of Mr. D. L. Anderson, a White Carnation is provided for every person worshipping in The Temple. We want you to wear it in honor of your mother. Surely among all the good gifts that God has bestowed upon men, there is none more precious than a Mother's love. Let this be the day when the incense of prayer rises to God in Thanksgiving for the Precious Gift. It would be a great pleasure for us to greet Miss Jarvis again this year, for we are glad to recall that she attended her first Mothers' Day Service in The Temple.”

Anna Jarvis, born on May 1, 1864 in Webster, West Virginia, near Grafton, attended public schools as well as Augusta Female Academy located in Staunton, Virginia. It is now known as Mary Baldwin College, a prestigious, private women's college. She then became a school teacher in Grafton.

In 1902, following her father's death, Anna and her mother moved to Philadelphia and lived with her brother Claude. At that time she met Mr. John Wanamaker, founder of the department store, who invited her to speak at the popular Wanamaker Store Auditorium at 13th and Market Streets on Sunday afternoon, May 10, 1908. It was reported that she spoke for over an hour to a crowd of 5,000 with many more unable to gain entrance.

Personally, Miss Jarvis organized a prestigious Mothers' Day Committee with members Hon. John Wanamaker, Mr. Henry J. Heinz, her brother Claude, Mr. Norman F. Kendall of Grafton and herself. She labored diligently to make Mothers' Day a national holiday, by writing hundreds of letters to legislators and business executives.

President Woodrow Wilson initially proclaimed it a national holiday in 1914, and eight other presidents have followed suit.

Interestingly enough, when once the observance became popular, Anna Jarvis became extremely troubled at the commercialization of the day and opposed the exploitation of it. She thought it was wrong to purchase a Mothers' Day card and faulted children for not writing or visiting their mothers.

When she was faced with declining health, she spent her final days in the Marshall Square Sanitarium in West Chester, PA. and died on November 24, 1948. At eighty-four years of age, bitter, blind, and in poverty, she was buried in West Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia. Each year a grave-side memorial service is held at her grave on Mothers' Day. At one of those services it was the honor of this writer to be the clergy-officiant.