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video documentary

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**Saturday, September 12, 2009**

**[Grown in Detroit: Urban Farming and School Gardens in the Motor City](#)**



Detroit's urban farming initiatives are clearly gaining traction. An award-winning documentary is traveling the festival circuit and will soon be aired on TV: *Grown in Detroit*, by Dutch filmmakers Mascha and Manfred Poppenk. The film shows how nature has taken over Detroit's abandoned landscape, how farms, bee colonies, and native flowers now nourish a growing revolution. The film focuses on the gardening/farming program at the Catherine Ferguson Academy for Young Women, a school for pregnant and parenting teens. The filmmakers present the case that the students' initial resistance disappears when they reap the rewards of their bounty.

Watch the trailer at [www.grownindetroit.tv](http://www.grownindetroit.tv).





<http://www.blogcatalog.com/search.frame.php?term=catherine+ferguson&id=a73057701754dca72f5e3d614d1cf312>

### **Principal Asenath Andrews in front of the Catherine Ferguson Academy's barn**

A few years ago, I got to write a piece for *O, The Oprah Magazine* about the urban farming movement in the completely fascinating city of Detroit.

Detroit is one of the world's most extreme examples of a shrinking city. The population is less than half what it was in its heyday. Detroit's problems have been so severe and long-lasting, including arson and abandonment, that tearing down houses has long been one of the government's most important jobs. One-third of the land within city limits is now vacant, and there are stretches where the spacing between houses suggests rural North Dakota rather than a big industrial city.

Fortunately, enterprising people like Principal Asenath Andrews and the teachers at Catherine Ferguson Academy, a public school for teenaged mothers and their kids, are now farming some of that wasted land. Farming is an important part of the curriculum at Catherine Ferguson, and Principal Andrews is a visionary who sees a future in which some of these girls will make a living producing better food for the city in the city.

Now Dutch filmmakers Mascha and Manfred Poppenk have made a documentary about Catherine Ferguson called [Grown in Detroit](#) that will debut on PBS in Detroit September 22 from 9 to 10 pm.

The movie does a great job of showing how the experience of nature transforms the teenaged mothers at this amazing school. It also captures some of the strange, quiet romance of Detroit, where there seem to be more bicycles than cars because people are too poor to buy cars, where there are goats and haymaking in city neighborhoods, and lots of wonderful people stubbornly insisting that there is something very special and beautiful about any city--even the poorest city--that has the luxury of land for apples, peaches, and tomatoes.

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<http://metrotimes.com/editorial/story.asp?id=7026>

A place for teen moms to find success



Aleah Buck and Natisha Walker with their kids during first period.



Aleah Buck, 16, with her son, Allen, 1.



Gunn's friend, Danielle Simmons, 17, helps with Day' Jon Simmons, who is not a mother, goes to Ferguson because it's a good school.



Khadija Anderson tends to a horse on Catherine Ferguson's farm.



Photos by Cybelle Codish

Day' Jon thanks his mom, Takeshia Gunn, 16, before they head to school.



Gunn hurries to get Day' Jon and herself ready for school.



Beatrice Humphrey Abrams, 95, says caring for babies keeps her happy.



Principal G. Asenath Andrews explains the rigors of teen motherhood.

By [Lisa M. Collins](#)

Detroit public school student Takeshia Gunn stumbles out of bed at 6 a.m., groggy because her son Day’ Jon kept her up until 2 in the morning. The 17-year-old gently wakes the boy still sleeping in her bed.

She gets a plastic bowl of warm water, lays the 1-year-old out on the bed and unclothes and cleans him, methodically wiping a soapy cloth over his cherubic body as he stares unconsciously at a high school economics book lying near his head. They’re quiet; family members sleep in all the rooms of the small northwest Detroit house.

Gunn moves efficiently because there’s no time to spare. Normally she wakes at 4 a.m. to feed and dress her baby and herself so she can catch a city bus to school in time for a 7:30 a.m. class. The 90-minute ride includes a 30-minute wait for a second bus that’ll take her to Detroit’s Catherine Ferguson Academy. But a month ago a man attacked her at the bus stop — he tried to pull her into his car while she was alone in the dark — but the bus driver pulled up just in time. Since then Gunn takes the bus only when she must.

“The only alternative is to drop out, and that’s not an option,” Gunn says. But today she has a ride. She feeds Day’ Jon grilled ham and pancakes, then administers his asthma breathing treatment and three liquid medicines to his great protest. Though a picture of health, Day’ Jon is recovering from pneumonia, a virus, asthma, bronchitis and a collapsed lung. She packs him a change of clothes, some diapers and the medicines, checking off the items on a mental list.

“OK, now I can get ready,” she mumbles, rubbing her eyes.

It's the beginning of a typically long day for Gunn and her son. But for this teen mom, 15-hour days are apparently of no concern. Mondays and Wednesdays, Gunn takes a parenting and family literacy class after school until 5 p.m. for elective credit before catching a bus home with Day' Jon. Tuesdays and Thursdays, she takes night classes until 6 p.m. After a full day of school and lugging her son and books and his baby bag to school and on and off buses, she'll get home in time to feed him and do homework and get ready to rise at dawn again.

Just a year and nine months ago Gunn was a year behind in school, skipping class, playing around, making C's and D's at Cooley High. She got pregnant at age 15. Then she found out about Catherine Ferguson Academy — an alternative Detroit public school for teen moms that provides nursery service. Now Gunn is a top student making A's and B's, a member of student council and on the Honor Roll for grades and perfect attendance. When she graduates in June, she plans to attend Eastern Michigan University to become a nurse.

“I want to be a nurse because I know I'll always have a job and won't struggle financially, because there is a shortage of nurses,” Gunn says. “I have a child. I want him to be able to depend on me. I can't leave him at home with my mom. And I can't provide for him working at McDonald's. You can't make it out there working at a fast-food place.

“I have a child and I want him to have all the things that I didn't have, all the things I missed out on, to celebrate Christmas and birthdays and special occasions. No child should grow up in this world with nothing to look forward to. I've got no choice but to get an education.”

Apparently Gunn has found just the place to achieve her goals — a little two-story school tucked away in inner-city Detroit.

### **Mom school rules**

While Detroit public schools are among the most maligned anywhere, with dilapidated facilities and failing test scores and a reputation that repels many families, there are diamonds in the rough and students who will succeed despite the odds. Amid the turmoil, the Catherine Ferguson Academy — an “alternative” school in the district that offers middle- and high-school courses — has quietly made a national name for itself.

This year the school was named a Breakthrough High School by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. One of 12 schools nationally to win the distinction, Catherine Ferguson earned it based on the following criteria: At least 50 percent of the school is minority; 50 percent of the student body qualifies for free and reduced-price meals; and at least 90 percent of students graduate and are accepted to college.

The academy had no problem meeting the requirements — with 94 percent black students and 5 percent Hispanic, and more than 90 percent eligible for free or reduced lunches, every year Catherine Ferguson achieves a 90 percent graduation rate; 100 percent of



those who graduate (85 last year) are accepted to two- or four-year colleges, most with financial aid, says the school's principal, G. Asenath Andrews.

"Kids transform themselves here," Andrews says. "We're just a pot and kids jump in and turn themselves from lead into gold."

Every year, enrollment is first come, first served for as many as 400 students and 200 babies. There is no academic requirement; most of the girls are in the process of dropping out when they enter. As many as 20 percent drop out every year, Andrews says. (The 90 percent graduation rate is based on students who make it to their senior year.)

Andrews says the difference at her school is personal attention to each student. While Detroit public schools average 35 students for every teacher, Catherine Ferguson has an 18 to 1 ratio. Each student is assigned to a homeroom teacher whom she stays with until she graduates. The homeroom teacher is responsible for looking after the student, the "first line" before issues head to the principal's office. When the kids don't show up or don't do their homework, a teacher asks, "Why? Where are you? What's going on?"

"What we know about schools that are successful is that kids feel involved," Andrews says. "I couldn't work in a school where the teachers didn't care. If there's a problem with a student, I'll go to her house, to her neighborhood."

Catherine Ferguson coaches every student on friendship, respect and loyalty as well as parenting skills. The school offers on-site services, including food stamps, an immunization clinic, dental services, and parenting/family literacy and counseling classes. Also, students can take a three-week summer school program at Queens College in Canada, as well as other off-site study programs. To graduate, students must do an internship in a professional setting.

The one-stop education and social-service center is a great boon to Fior Marmol, 19, a young runaway who had a baby at age 15.

"When I graduate in January, I'm going to go to Central Michigan University," Marmol says. "I want to get a four-year law degree and learn two other languages. I already know English and Spanish. I want to go into the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]."

"I live at Alternatives for Girls and walk to school with my son. He's four and goes to kindergarten across the street. He went here, to Catherine Ferguson, for three years. It helped him. It helped me that I could bring him to school. I lived on Joy Road by Greenfield; it took me two to three hours to get to school. I lived on my own. My house got burned down, by an ex of mine. Before that I got threats. I called the police and they told me to get a shotgun and that I could shoot him if he got on the property."

"I found out about Catherine Ferguson from other students that went here, girls that graduated. It was like a myth, that there's a school for pregnant girls. It's been a great

school. The teachers here care more. At my other school I could leave whenever I wanted and nobody noticed.”

Seventy-five percent of Catherine Ferguson’s teachers have been there for 10 years or more. School counselors work with each student to come up with a graduation plan and help them apply to college and for grants and scholarships. The school has an aggressive mission statement: “To ensure that every student completes her high school education and is conferred with a State of Michigan endorsement. Each young woman must leave us with the skills necessary to be a competent, caring mother and be able to support herself and her family.”

At a night parenting class, students talk about their dreams while playing organized games and reading books to their kids.

Natisha Walker, 16, catches the bus to get herself and her daughter, Tanyla, to school. “I’m going to college. I got my head on straight. I know what I got to do.”

Crystal Gomez, 17, says she’s going to Henry Ford Community College to be a defense attorney. “I want to help people with a low income.”

“I’m going to Wayne State, pre-law,” Janel Norman, 16, says.

Aleah Buck got pregnant when she was 14. She was making F’s and D’s at Osborn High. She entered Catherine Ferguson last year when her son was 2 weeks old. Now she makes the honor roll and she’s graduating next year.

“If I hadn’t come here, I’d probably still be in the ninth grade,” she says. “Or I would have dropped out. Here, there’s nothing to do but focus. I hate the dress code. I have a lot to wear and I can’t wear it. And the 10-day rule, I hate that; even if you have an emergency you can’t miss more than 10 days. But here, the school is good. At Osborn they don’t sit down and talk to you. Here, they talk to you and help you work.

“I’ve already gotten four academic scholarships, and I’m going to get more. I want to go to Michigan State University and study medicine. I want to be a gynecologist or a pediatrician. I feel that all children should be healthy.

“My son made me a better person. I don’t regret him. I’d rather spend time with him when I get home at night than go out. I only regret that I didn’t come to this school in the first place.”

Teachers at the school say they judge success not only by how the teens are doing, but by the babies’ progress. Andrews says kids of teen parents start school two years behind on average; her nursing staff of 14 intends to change that.

The school is Detroit’s only site for the Early Head Start program, which concentrates on children under the age of 4 by making sure the babies, for instance, get talked to and read

to so they have high word-recognition skills. “It’s one of the most exciting things I can even think about,” Andrews says. “I was thinking of retiring, but I want to stay until these babies get into kindergarten. We want to set them up for extraordinary school success.”

Some 15 percent of Catherine Ferguson students aren’t pregnant or mothers. “Girls sneak in. One girl borrowed another girl’s urine to show us she was pregnant. We’ve had girls bring in their friends’ babies,” Andrews says. Girls without babies must write a letter to district CEO Kenneth Burnley describing why they want to attend Catherine Ferguson, and then behave once they’re accepted. “They are guests,” Andrews says.

The school doesn’t excel on all levels.

“If you look at MEAP scores, they’re not going to look good,” Andrews says. “I think we get the students ready. If you talk to kids, I think we’d get an A. If you look at MEAP we wouldn’t even get a C. We are a good school; we are not a great school. If we had a great school we’d have to start producing the kinds of test scores that make us look great. It starts with, ‘Is she OK? Is she living in a safe place? Is she getting prenatal care?’ Then you get to, ‘Did she do her homework.’ Our kids come with so much stuff to worry about, we never worried about test scores. If you base anything on just one standard, it’s not a true indication of what’s going on.”

Andrews shares the sentiment of Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, who said in a recent speech that the city needs more single-sex schools. Kilpatrick talked of all-boys schools, while Andrews emphasizes the need for all-girls schools. And at Catherine Ferguson, there’s also a dress code.

“Women fight over two things: boys and clothes. We don’t have any boys over the age of 3, so we only had to deal with the clothes issue. We tried the boys thing once. We had three boys here. But girls give power away too readily, as do women. They were wonderful boys and their stock will never be that high. When they graduated, they held two of six elected leadership positions. You’re telling me these boys were better than 80 girls? We as women abdicate our power so easily. We haven’t had boys apply since then.”

Student Frederica Owens, 16, says, “It’s better here because all there is to do is work. There’s no boys, boys, boys.”

## **Magic**

It wouldn’t be far-fetched to conclude that Andrews possesses magical powers of persuasion. While Detroit public schools are bleeding students and dollars, prompting the recent announcement that the district will close 40 schools and cut 4,000 jobs to shore up a \$200 million two-year deficit, Catherine Ferguson, somehow, every year, obtains about double the funding per student of the average Detroit public school. Andrews is tight-lipped about her budget and how she makes it work, except to say that the school is district-funded and gets dollars for special-needs students.

Andrews is a Fulbright Scholar who grew up on Eight Mile Road when it was dotted with farms. She was one of 40 first cousins who had, Andrews says, an idyllic childhood running and playing and eating together at their grandparents' and parents' houses. When babies were born, women banded together to cook and clean and to help care for them and sing and pray. "It was a community," Andrews says. "Now, it's acceptable for women to say, 'I don't get along with women.'"

A '70s feminist, Andrews adopted the mantra that you must live what you believe, not just profess it. "I think that's why I'm at this school," she says.

After getting her master's at Wayne State University, studying for a doctorate at the University of Michigan, and working as a teacher in Detroit schools, Andrews came to the Catherine Ferguson Academy in 1985. The school is named after a famed New York City freed slave who, though illiterate, dedicated her life to educating the city's impoverished people in the early 1800s.

Andrews has shepherded the school's growth since it started in the Salvation Army with a couple of desks and a playpen.

How did Andrews accomplish the academy's growth and success?

She bakes.

"Making peach cobbler works, and inviting people to lunch," Andrews says. "People aren't CEOs first or directors first. They're people first. We send candy when we send requests downtown. We put plants in mugs. We make honey and put a label on there saying the honey was made by female workers.

"You have to do this kind of stuff to stay in the game. And it's a seductive place. The cycle is stopped here. Women don't want their babies to struggle as hard as they have."

### **A day in Camp Hope**

At 8:30 a.m., science teacher Paul Weertz is out in the parking lot chasing chickens into the coop. A beautiful red barn built by the students flanks the academy's small farm, home to several goats, a huge sheep, rabbits, a pony, a beehive, two horses, ducks and at least a dozen hens and roosters.

Minutes later Weertz is dragging a sheep by its leg as the animal jerks into the air. Still holding the sheep, Weertz straddles a goat, calling one of his students into the wrestling match to get the animals back into their pens. The girls are tending to morning chores.

The pony is devouring the horse's food and two students are trying to lure him away with the hay he's supposed to eat. Others speak while working:

“Where’s the space heater for the chicken coop? How can we collect eggs if we don’t find that heater?”

“I’m not getting near that sheep. He’s too aggressive.”

“Damn this goat is bursting,” says another, squirting foamy white milk into two big metal bowls.

Weertz coordinates a fairly productive goat milk, egg and honey farm, as well as a fruit, vegetable and flower garden (with one plot for each student in the program) and a small but varied orchard that teaches teen moms and their young children about the cycle of life, about taking care of animals and growing their own food, about health, and, sometimes, about death and guts, when Weertz slaughters one of the animals for the kids to dissect and study.

Inside the academy it looks more like a school than the idyllic farm-in-the-city outside. Lockers are painted blue and green and the walls are lined with inspirational art, messages, paintings and pictures of iconic black women. The halls reverberate with the sound of wailing and screaming. Dozens of babies — from infants to 3-year-olds — are hollering for their mamas, who are dropping them off to go to class.

Upstairs, a teacher in first period “mastery” class instructs her students. “A lot of time our water sits in the pipes and gets contaminated with lead. We need to let the water run before we let our children drink it. We need to dust and mop areas that could be contaminated with dust. If your baby has high lead levels, have your child eat more fruits and vegetables to flush out the toxin. What does lead cause? Learning disabilities, anemia ...”

Down the hall, girls are getting ready for dance class while music plays; a goat stands outside the window looking in.

It’s just a normal day in the Catherine Ferguson Academy.

There’s something very old-fashioned about the school, plopped down at the junction of Lawton and Selden in a very poor area of Detroit off the Jeffries freeway on the city’s near West Side.

Outside of the wailing rooms, several “grandmothers” — part-time workers from Catholic Social Services — watch over big red buggies filled with tiny people. One of the grandmothers grimaces at the students gossiping on the stairwell.

“They should appreciate it,” Gussie Hendrick says. “I’m a senior citizen. This is a good school. Some of them appreciate it, and there’s a bunch that don’t. They should go to class because they have the help they need. But who is me to say?”

“They need to wake up and smell the coffee. In my day coming up, this wouldn’t happen. If you had a baby at 17, 18, you were considered grown. I was 15 when I had my baby and they didn’t allow me to go to any school. But that was a different time.”

“This is life for me,” Beatrice Humphrey Abrams, 95, says. “It’s something for me to hold onto. I look forward to coming and talking to the babies. I think what’s wrong with old people is we give up too quick and have nothing to look forward to. Just sitting in the living room and watching TV, that’s not living.

“I keep busy and don’t feel sorry for myself. I get my exercise and I look forward to seeing the babies. I come from a large family of nine boys and five girls. It’s a little lonely being the last one left, but I’ve always kept busy.

“My first job was working for a private family in Bloomfield Hills. The man was sick. His wife, you know how wealthy people are, she was always going to things and playing cards. He’d give me \$5 a day to take him to the doctor because his wife was too busy. That’s money, you know. Our family, as poor people we had a happy life. We always looked forward to Christmas. We’d go to bed early and take our socks off and clean the whole house so Santa wouldn’t trip on anything. Sometimes I don’t know if kids know what fun is anymore.”

Down the hall, Andrews’ office is alive with activity.

Two teachers walk in to report they still haven’t found a girl who’s been skipping school, and they can’t reach her mother. Andrews tells them to keep trying; another house visit might be in order. Andrews picks up the phone, saying out of the side of her mouth, “She’s 14, a hard nut. She won’t go to class. She’s working through a lot of issues. If we don’t get this girl some help now, we might not be able to at all.”

One task is barely completed before the sound of “Ms. Andrews! Ms. Andrews!” is heard. A steady stream of students and teachers ask the principal for this or that, to get a slip signed or to share a word. Teachers come in joking and laughing with Andrews, who can’t possibly get along this well with everyone. And, in fact, many students grouse under their breath that they aren’t too fond of Ms. Andrews. They complain she’s mean, too strict.

A toddler runs in with her young mother at her heels. The baby goes straight for a grapefruit sitting on Andrews’s desk. Amid the chaos, the principal’s imposing figure is animated even when she’s commanding submission; her eyes are playful, her face ringed with elegant large braids.

Andrews puts the toddler in her lap and peels the grapefruit; the child voraciously digs her mouth into the fruit as soon as it’s exposed.

“Who is this child? Charlene, did you feed this baby today?” Andrews says. The girl puckers her face and devours the bitter fruit. “What crazy baby is this?” Andrews says, tears of laughter streaming from the sides of her eyes.

As students and teachers continue their litany of petitions, Andrews conducts business while entertaining the child.

A girl walks into the office.

“Ms. Andrews, I’m not going to graduate because all the classes I need are in final hour,” the girl says.

“You aren’t graduating anyway,” Andrews says. “Didn’t you get my letter? We made a deal, and you walk away from that deal and now you want to complain that you aren’t going to graduate? You know what you need to do.”

“She’s going to have to take summer school,” Andrews says when the girl leaves the office.

Another girl comes in to say that she’s had a second child and has been discharged from the Marines just in time to escape service in Iraq.

“What’s wrong, didn’t we teach you how babies were made?” Andrews says.

“That’s how I got out of the Marine Corps,” the girl says, adding that she’s going to apply to nursing school.

“You can get that same training free from the city,” Andrews says. “Don’t sign anything until we see it.”

A teacher walks in, saying, “I want to talk about Marlene coming in late to homeroom and then throwing a tantrum. Well, I’ll go talk to her.”

The toddler sitting in Andrews’ lap gets up and starts running around her desk, grabbing wildly for a candy jar. As her mother comes in to remove the candy from her little hand, the baby starts throwing a fit. “Walk away, walk away,” Andrews says. “She’s invisible.”

It works. The girl stops crying.

“It’s a mental hospital in here, not really a school,” Andrews says. “Teenagers are just like real, real old people. They’re slow. They want to do things their own way. They’re egocentric and temperamental.”

She heads to a parent-teacher conference. As she walks through the hall she grabs the arm of a girl in sweatpants. “What are you doing out of class?” Andrews barks.

“My cramps are so bad they feel like contractions,” the girl says.

“So every time you have a period you’re going to go home? I’m not electing you president. I’m so disappointed, so disappointed.

“I thought you would make a great president.”

**More:**

[Teen births down](#)

The numbers are still high, but slipping.

**Lisa M. Collins is a staff writer for Metro Times. Send comments to [lcollins@metrotimes.com](mailto:lcollins@metrotimes.com).**

## Comments

**+On 11/6/2008 4:05:41 PM, garnernrg said:**

I was a student at CFA from 96-99. I read the article and cried through it. After doing a google search for the schools address for my personal records, I lucked up on it and it was a joy to read. I currently live in Florida with my daughter who is 11 years old and an honor roll student. I graduated from WCCCD in 2004 and if not for the assistance provided by Ms. Andrews, Ms. Boswell and Mr. Weertz I would have never made it. This was a very inspiring article and I wish I was able to obtain a full copy of the periodical. Can this be arranged? Please contact me at [garnernrg@hotmail.com](mailto:garnernrg@hotmail.com) if there is a possibility.

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Just a windmill on a dell



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By [Lisa M. Collins](#)

What does Detroit's inner city have in common with a remote and semi-arid village in India, and the Nobel Peace Center in Norway?

Internationally known environmental artist Marjetica Potrc.

Last year Potrc won a Nobel Peace Center contest for her plan to build a system of windmills and greenery on the Nobel Center's roof. But the Oslo government said no to Potrc's proposal, so she devised a plan to export the project, choosing to do her thing at Barefoot College in India and Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit.

At Barefoot, a remarkable community school in a poor desert area, Potrc and the students installed solar panels that now power the college's computers. In Detroit, Potrc enlisted students to install a small solar panel and a little gray windmill atop Catherine Ferguson's bright red barn.

Catherine Ferguson is located in an impoverished neighborhood off Martin Luther King Boulevard, near I-96. It's a Detroit public school for teen mothers and pregnant girls run by the charismatic scholar Aseneth Andrews.

In addition to the school's main focus — placing teen moms in college and teaching them life skills along with academics — the academy also runs a full-fledged farm under the direction of science teacher Paul Weertz. Beside the student-built barn is a large field for

horses, goats, chickens, a sheep and other animals, surrounded by lush gardens belonging to individual students, a beehive and a fruit orchard. The windmill and solar panel installed by Potrc will power the barn and farm tools.

Once there, you might ask yourself: I see the value of the windmill and solar panel for educating high-schoolers, but is it art? If you say art must be beautiful, then Potrc's project will not qualify. She isn't interested in aesthetics as much as she is moved by the intersection of people and technology, architecture and design.

As she installed the system and met with students at Catherine Ferguson, Potrc was enthusiastic. "This school is fantastic, amazing," Potrc says. "We are totally inspired by Paul Weertz. The school is a model for the community. They teach by example the issues related to life. They are going back to the basics. We have to go back to the basics.

"The windmill offers hands-on educational empowerment for the students. They've demystified the technology. Anyone can do this. Everyone can do it."

*To see Potrc's work, visit [potrc.org](http://potrc.org).*

**Lisa M. Collins is a freelance writer. Send comments to [letters@metrotimes.com](mailto:letters@metrotimes.com).**



**<http://www.modeldmedia.com/features/sustain60.aspx>**

## **How Detroit's Gardens Grow**

By: Kelli B. Kavanaugh



September 5, 2006

*Editor's note: This is the second installment of a series looking at sustainability in Detroit. If you missed the first, [click here](#).*

Considering just how much vacant land there is in Detroit — 28,000 parcels owned by the city alone, according to the City of Detroit's Planning and Development Department — it may very well take some radical concepts to again make use of it all. While there is always value in the optimist's perspective that some day each and every one of Detroit's thoroughfares will again be lined with bustling shops, a pragmatist may ask, "Have you driven West Warren all the way to the city limits lately?"

It is politician's ad-hoc devotion to plowing ahead as if Detroit's decline is ever-temporary (for more than 50 years!) that leaves the city bailing out a leaky raft. Many solutions that may help to solve its elementary problem — too much land and too few people — may be controversial (i.e., vacating and cutting off city services to entire neighborhoods — can you imagine the swift political death of an elected official who proposed such a plan?). But such ideas deserve to, at a minimum, be talked about and debated in public forums.

Such is the case with urban farming. On one hand, it may seem an innocuous use of small, forgotten parcels. Yet, when looked at from a macro-scale, as in the concerted decision to create farmland on underutilized acreage with the intent to produce food for resident consumption — that's when the political batteries get all charged up.

Regardless of the politics, there are groups and individuals all around the city who have begun to use vacant land — some privately owned, some city-owned — as personal gardens, community gardens and even full-scale farm operations.

### **Greening together**



When [Farm-A-Lot](#) — a city-sponsored program that provided seeds and tilling free-of-charge to residents — hit the dirt, several of the city’s most active “green” organizations came together to fill the void. These organizations, [Greening of Detroit](#), Detroit Agricultural

Network (DAN), [Michigan State University Extension](#) and [Earthworks Urban Farm](#), banded together as the Detroit Garden Network. Greening of Detroit’s Ashley Atkinson notes that a “USDA Food Security Grant in 2004 [enabled us to] formalize our partnership.”

Each group brings its urban gardening partners one piece of the puzzle needed to get started and keep going — for example, MSU Extension hosts educational courses and Earthworks provides gardens with start-up seeds and transplants. “Each group plays a different role, and it fits into each group’s [individual] mission,” says Lindsay Turpin, who works with DAN.

The Garden Network has pooled together gardeners by geographic cluster (there are 10 in the city, [click here](#)), allowing gardeners within each cluster to coordinate workdays, pool resources, and, as Atkinson points out, “share advice, inspiration, ideas and pep talks. We’re building a citywide network within neighborhoods, and that’s a big change.”

Currently, five of the city’s 10 clusters have leaders and centers, where gardeners can check out tools and pick up compost. Billy O’Bryan, an [AmeriCorps](#) volunteer with the Garden Network asserts, “every cluster has enough gardeners to support a lead, and each one has its own strengths and weaknesses. Every scenario needs its own [cluster center].”

The centers promote interaction among gardeners, says Turpin. “They depend on each other rather than us giving away resources.” She says the Garden Program services about 150 family gardens and 100 community gardens.

### **Nurturing communities**

Each September, DAN gives a citywide tour of selected examples of these community gardens, which can range in size from a few raised beds to multiple acres.

O’Bryan works specifically with the Cluster 4 Center, a two-acre farm that is associated with Detroit Public School’s Catherine Ferguson Academy, a school for mothers-to-be and mothers. Its flexible curriculum, parenting classes and nursery care is designed to provide a supportive environment to enable young mothers to attend high school.

The farm is the brainchild of life science teacher Paul Weertz, whose concept evolved



from a realization that the chemically preserved samples traditionally used to teach biology “would not be good for pregnant students.” Starting with just a few live animals and small gardens, Weertz’s vision has grown to a holistic curriculum based on the working of a farm.

A home repair class built the barn, which is powered by a wind turbine and solar collectors. Students plant and maintain garden plots in pairs, participate in a group research project designed around the workings of the farm, and individually “mother” a chicken egg. Weertz explains, “The egg is your baby. When the egg is in the incubator, you have to turn it two to three times a day and monitor its moisture content and temperature. Then you have to teach the chick to peck for food and find water.”

The farm’s menagerie is rounded out with goats, sheep, horses, bunnies, chickens, ducks, turkeys, bees and worms, each of which receive some amount of animal husbandry from students throughout the school year. “Care for animals integrates into your own life,” Weertz says. “We think that the responsibility involved ties into care for your children.”

Selling the food they have grown at market brings the students lessons in accounting and marketing, as well as awareness of nutrition and the real cost of food.

O’Bryan manages an additional network of volunteers from the community who keep the goats milked, work a share of the harvest, and “watch the barn when no one is here.”

In this way, then, the Garden Program not only helps the gardeners but nurtures and strengthens the surrounding community, as well.

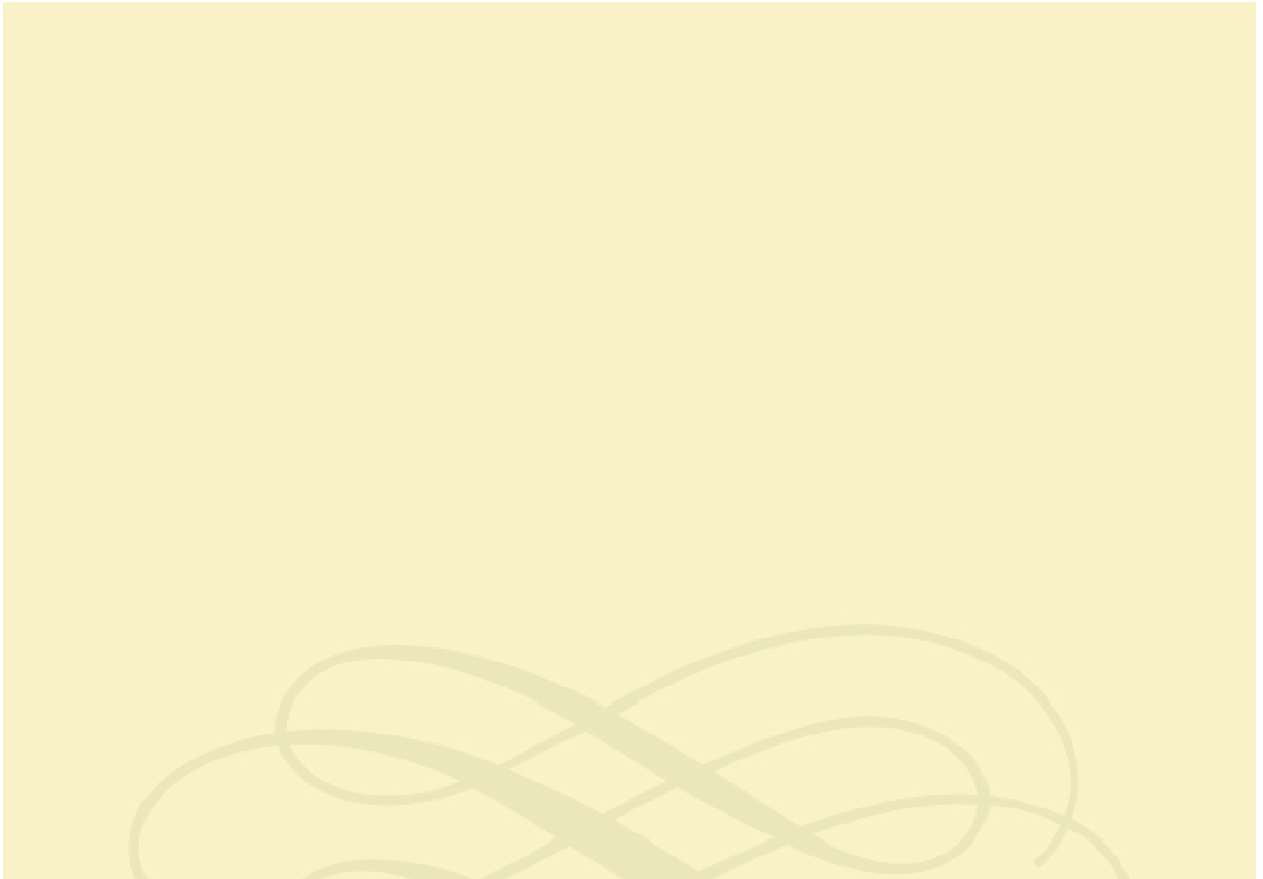
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*Photos:*

***Catherine Ferguson Academy Farm and Billy O'Bryan Photos Copyright Dave Krieger***  
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Catherine Ferguson

ACademy



Catherine Ferguson Academy



**Introduction:**

The Ferguson Academy for Young Women is an alternative high school located in Detroit, MI. They provide education and resources for pregnant teens, grades 9-12. Many of the teens come from underprivileged backgrounds and are faced with daily

challenges that infringe upon their educational opportunities. The Ferguson Academy strives to provide quality education in order to ensure a bright future for each child. The goal of the principal and teachers at the academy is to prevent the pregnancy cycle from reoccurring in the next generation of infants. Lots used for farming and a barn built by the students lie adjacent to the school. The barn houses a variety of farm animals that the students help care for.

**Eligibility:**

The Ferguson Academy is open to any high school age pregnant teen that lives in Detroit. They recently held a citywide baby shower in order to encourage teen mothers and pregnant teens who were not attending school, to enroll in their program. Each student must be accepted to a two year college or four year university before they are eligible to graduate.

**Services:**

The academy offers many features to encourage the success of their students. Some of the amenities include childcare and hands-on interactive techniques. The school offers choir, sports, and holds special events for the teens. The kids have the opportunity to attend movie and lunch outings, and are able to attend a high school dance facilitated by the staff. The principal and staff of the Ferguson Academy do their best to ensure that their students are prepared for standardized college exams. Tutoring programs for the ACT and MEAP are available after school.

**On-site Daycare:**

The majority of pregnant teens drop out because they have no access to childcare. The academy offers a fully equipped nursery, complete with cribs high chairs, and refrigerators. In order to accommodate the students' parental obligations outside of class, the academy provides onsite medical clinics and WIC services. The students are conveniently able to attend class and care for their babies in the same environment. The principal and staff at the Ferguson academy encourage students to implement interactive learning techniques while they care for the infants. Many of the students enjoy reading to their children in the nursery's soothing environment.

**Available Courses:**

The students follow the normal curriculum established by the Detroit School District. They have additional access to college preparatory and career courses and electives. Some of the following include:

- Music
- Home Repair



Technology/IT  
Fine Arts  
Parenting

The school recently implemented an Urban Farming course under the direction of science teacher Paul Weertz. The students learn how to grow and nurture plants in an urban environment. Fresh produce is often scarce in urban environments and too costly for financially burdened students. Ninety percent of the student body qualify for free or reduced meals. As a result of this farming program, 100 percent of the students have access to fresh produce that is often unavailable to many of the teens.

### **History:**

The school is named after Catherine Ferguson, a famous freed slave who lived in New York in the early 1800's, until her death in 1854. Although illiterate, she has been accredited as one of the largest promoters of education in impoverished areas of New York. The school began in the Salvation Army with a few desks and a playpen.

Andrews arrived in 1985, and has worked hard to increase enrollment and funding. The school is now located downtown on Selden street, and was recently named a "Breakthrough High School" by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

### **School Info:**

If you are interested in attending the Catherine Ferguson Academy For Young Women, contact the main office at:  
(313) 596-4771

The school address is:  
2750 Selden St.  
Detroit, MI 48208.

For more information, visit the school website:  
<http://www.detroit.k12.mi.us/schools/school/742>

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<http://www.iptv.org/mtom/archivedfeature.cfm?Fid=257>  
**Farming Smack in the Middle of Detroit?**

**Iowa Democrat Tom Harkin, the ranking minority member on the Senate Agriculture Committee, says the farm policy agenda in the coming months will be diverse. Harkin says it will include: monitoring Rabobank's intended purchase of Farm Credit Services of Omaha ... the fiscal 2005 farm appropriations bill ... and the tracking of soybean rust as it migrates from the Southern Hemisphere.**





girl Catherine

The 13-year-old nationally, is a Named after

freedom was purchased before she founded the first home for unwed mothers in New York, the school offers a program that helps its students learn about agriculture.

**For people who sit down at the family dinner table each night, some of those "priorities" may seem irrelevant. But connecting the links in the food chain is not a pointless matter to one urban educator and his eager class of students. Laurel Bower Burgmaier explains.**



Goats, chickens and beehives usually are not part of an urban student's regular curriculum --except for students at the all-Ferguson Academy in Detroit.

academy, one of only four of its kind school for pregnant and parenting teens. Catherine Ferguson, a slave whose

Porsha Martin, Catherine Ferguson Academy student: "It's nice because most people have to go far out in the country just to have a little farm activity, and it's cool because I never did anything like this before. It's a first time experience."

Often, children who grow up in the inner city don't know how the food on their table is grown and harvested. But, Paul Weertz, a science teacher at Catherine Ferguson Academy decided to change that. Weertz calls himself an 'urban farmer', scattering his farm over 10 acres in seven locations around the city. On these 10 acres, he harvests hay, alfalfa, honey, eggs, and goat's milk. And while he's just 10 minutes from downtown, his backyard is anything but urban. In the alley behind his house, alfalfa is nearly ready to be harvested and chickens scratch in a garage that he converted into a barn.

Paul Weertz, Catherine Ferguson Academy teacher: "The city of Detroit has like 40,000 vacant lots with the loss of jobs and people moving out, which is about 10,000 acres. So, my theory is instead of paying to cut these weeds, from a farming point of view, that is a crop you can feed an animal with."

For more than a decade, Weertz has tried to connect his urban students to nature and food. Instead of taking them out to the farm, however, he decided to bring the farm to them. With the support of the school's administration, he developed an agriscience class, which works like any standard science class. But, in addition to tests and lab work, the students also take care of a gamut of animals and gardens on a farm --in what has become a barnyard located in the school's backyard.

Annette Lewis, Catherine Ferguson Academy student: "Goats, I love the baby goats. They're my favorite. And, I like Duffy, the fat horse. I like that horse."

Weertz and other faculty members at Catherine Ferguson Academy have three main objectives for the farming class. One, to teach the students proper nutrition and parenting skills; two, to give their inner city pupils the same opportunities rural students have by experiencing farm life first-hand. And three, they hope the girls will have a better understanding of rural America, by learning where their food comes from and by developing an appreciation for farming.

Paul Weertz, Catherine Ferguson Academy teacher: "Sometimes, I think it's almost a civil rights issue, where you wouldn't go to rural kids and say, 'You don't need to take computer science, you're just farmers.' That would be crazy because those kids have a right to everything that they



can be. But yet with city kids, there is no agriscience program and they could be involved in agriculture. I think they need to at least be given the opportunity to see what it's like."

Under the watchful eye of Weertz, the students grow alfalfa and other crops to feed the livestock. A few years ago, they even helped build a barn in the schoolyard. The girls, most of whom have never spent time on a farm, are gaining hands-on experience caring for animals and a first-hand understanding of the food chain by raising their own gardens.

Ottisa Crawford, Catherine Ferguson Academy student: This is a tomato plant and this is a strawberry plant. I'm taking them home so I can have a little garden of my own."

Sparkle George, Catherine Ferguson Academy student: "We're learning stuff that we use in everyday life like raw jelly and honey, all the stuff we get from them and from them. We do everything out here."

Studies show people living in poor neighborhoods are less likely to find fresh, healthy food. In some of the roughest neighborhoods, it's easier for families to find drugs and weapons than a garden. The students at Catherine Ferguson Academy are discovering they can change these statistics. They plant and harvest their own gardens, taking the produce home to share with their families



ShayTuan Jones and Chaquila Brown, Catherine Ferguson Academy students: "We know where it's coming from. We know that we that we planted it in here. It's coming from good stuff. I'm tight. I like it because it ain't coming from...it's fresh."

Ottisa Crawford, Catherine Ferguson Academy student: "Me and my grandmother, we planted some watermelons and we usually don't do that. But, Mr. Kemp gave me some seeds, so we planted some watermelons and once they grow, we're going to eat them."

Weertz' agriscience class offers a unique opportunity for these urban teenagers to experience sights, sounds, and smells of a world outside their own.

Weertz says while the main goal of the farming class is to educate the students about agriculture, more importantly, he hopes the girls are learning about themselves.

Sparkle George, Catherine Ferguson Academy student: "My momma always tells me it's funny you've got a farm in the city. Many people don't have it this good and I think it's good to have hands-on experience because it's much better. Many people don't grasp real well with reading and all that. So, I think it's much better out here."

Annette Lewis, Catherine Ferguson Academy student: "And, I think the home repair, we built that fence with Mr. Weertz. We put up that fence right there. He taught us how to make fence and do the cement and all that, so he teaches us a lot of stuff that will come in handy in everyday life. It's real nice."

Being teen moms, the girls already have a lot stacked against them, but Weertz hopes they feel proud of their accomplishments both on the school's farm and in life. He claims nearly 100 percent of the students at Catherine Ferguson Academy are placed in post-secondary college programs. And, he says the school has sharply reduced the likelihood the girls will have another baby while still in their teens --by more than half of the national average.

While the farming class is not entirely responsible for the successes the students are achieving, it is making an impact.

For Market to Market, I'm Laurel Bower Burgmaier.

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine\\_Ferguson\\_\(educator\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_Ferguson_(educator))

## Catherine Ferguson (educator)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

For other persons named Catherine Ferguson, see [Catherine Ferguson \(disambiguation\)](#).

**Catherine "Katy"<sup>[1]</sup> Ferguson** (1779 – [July 11, 1854](#)) was an [African American pioneer](#), [philanthropist](#), [social worker](#)<sup>[2]</sup> and [educator](#) who founded the first [Sunday school](#) in [New York City](#).<sup>[3]</sup>

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## [\[edit\]](#) Early life

Ferguson was born into slavery in 1779,<sup>[3]</sup> while her mother, Katy Williams, was being transported from Virginia to New York City.<sup>[1]</sup> After her mother was sold as a slave when Catherine was eight years old, she never had the chance to see her again.<sup>[3]</sup> Ferguson referred to their master, a Presbyterian elder, only by the initials "R. B.", in order "to conceal his identity" and to prevent embarrassment from his own family.<sup>[1]</sup> Her separation from her mother became her inspiration for helping children later in her life.<sup>[1]</sup>

At about sixteen or seventeen years old, a female friend bought her her freedom for the amount of US\$200<sup>[3]</sup>, an amount which she had to repay during a period of six years. But the original agreement was changed later: instead of paying back the sum, Ferguson's

benefactor decided to accept her offer of serving the "lady of the city" for eleven months which became the equivalent of US\$100. The remaining half was raised by Divie Bethune, a merchant in New York.<sup>[1]</sup> Afterwards, Ferguson became a baker of cakes sold for "weddings and parties".<sup>[1]</sup>

Ferguson married at the age of eighteen. She bore two children who both died during their infancy.<sup>[3]</sup> She died of [cholera](#) at her home in 1854, at the age of about 75.<sup>[2]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) As an educator

Although illiterate, Ferguson took care of poor and neglected black and white children in her neighborhood. Every Sunday, she brought these children to her home on Warren Street, New York, in order to provide them with religious education. From her house, and through the encouragement of a local minister, Rev. Dr. John Mitchell Mason of the Associate Reformed Church<sup>[1]</sup>, her Sunday School was moved to the basement of a church - where there was a lecture room<sup>[1]</sup> - on Murray Street in about 1814.<sup>[3][1]</sup> Because of her illiteracy, Ferguson was unable to write about her experiences in early America, thus being seldom mentioned by historians, but she was described to have responded to "the needs of the poor in an era which the poor were notably neglected".<sup>[1][2]</sup> Later on, her school became known as the Murray Street Sabbath School.<sup>[1]</sup> Ferguson's teaching instructions included the memorization of hymns and Scripture. Among Ferguson's visitors to the school were Isabella Graham and Reverend [Isaac Ferris](#).<sup>[1]</sup>

Apart from her efforts in educating children, Ferguson also held prayer meetings for children and adults twice a week, a work that went on for more than 40 years.<sup>[3][2]</sup> She also took care of 48 children she had gathered "from the streets or from the unfit parents" until she was able to find "suitable homes for them".<sup>[3]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Recognition

Ferguson gained a degree of prominence during her lifetime because of her social work, as evidenced by the attention she received from the press when she died. Examples were the notice about her death in [The New York Times](#) on July 13, 1854 and a brief biography published by the [Tribune](#) on July 20, 1854.<sup>[1]</sup> Ferguson was also included among 330 notable persons in a biographical dictionary of [Benson J. Lossing](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) References

- <sup>^</sup> [a](#) [b](#) [c](#) [d](#) [e](#) [f](#) [g](#) [h](#) [i](#) [j](#) [k](#) [l](#) [m](#) Hartvik, Allen. [Catherine Ferguson: Black founder of a Sunday school](#), Negro History Bulletin, January-September, CBS Interactive Inc., BNET, findarticles.com, 1996, page 1
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3. <sup>^</sup> [a b c d e f g h Catherine Ferguson](#), Notable Women of Early America, World of Early America, Archiving Early America, EarlyAmerica.com, 2009

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[http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200804\\_omag\\_gardening\\_detroit](http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200804_omag_gardening_detroit)

## Gardening to Save Detroit

By Michele Owens



Photo: Francesco Lagnese

**Ducks. Rabbits. Chickens. Vegetable gardens. No, it's not a patch of rural America—it's Detroit, and it just might be showing other towns across America how to regenerate, blossom, and thrive.**

**[See how the seed of this great idea is blossoming.](#)**

Step through the front doors of the Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit, and you've entered what seems to be a typically cash-starved inner-city school: dimly lit, with lockers painted the color of pea soup, lots of dingy old wood, and nothing even remotely luxurious or high-tech in sight. And since this is a school for teenage mothers and their babies in the poorest and most dangerous big city in America, well, it's impossible not to worry that the students' prospects may be as dim as the corridor.

But in the strange and strangely lovely city of Detroit, it's a mistake to make assumptions. The students of this school are lucky in their principal, a tall, drolly funny woman named Asenath Andrews, and college acceptance is a condition for graduation here. Head out the school's side door into a blaze of sunlight, and the most unlikely and inspiring sight appears: an urban farm that is almost breathtaking in its scope.

There are horses here grazing on what was once a running track. Endless beds of vegetables ring the oval perimeter. There's a full-fledged orchard. There are rabbits, there are chickens, and there's English teacher Andrew Kemp milking the goats. He and science teacher Paul Weertz grow almost all the feed for the farm on a vacant lot across town and get the students to help bale the hay.

Ask Asenath how such an ambitious agricultural venture emerged from a concrete schoolyard, and she rolls her eyes. "The rabbits turned into chickens and the chickens turned into goats. Then the goats turned into horses. We even had a steer for a while, until he knocked one of the kids over while she was pregnant. Then we sent him to a vocational school, where the students butchered him. Still educational," she says with a laugh.

Asenath, who grew up in a serious gardening family, with a grandfather who actually earned a living farming on Eight Mile Road at the Detroit city limits, has made gardens throughout her career. Early on she had the "crazy" idea that she could grow enough food for an entire school lunch program; now, older and wiser, she simply believes that agriculture is a powerful teaching tool. She points to a nifty solar-powered barn built by the students and grows rhapsodic: "The barn raising! I wish we could do a barn raising every semester. It's *so* empowering for girls to do construction."

Not only does the farm help her teenagers learn everything from carpentry to biology, it also teaches them to be better mothers, Asenath believes. "There are estimates that by age 3, poor kids have heard 30 million fewer words than kids in middle-class families." She pauses. "That 30-million-word deficit keeps me awake at night. We're trying to teach teenagers to *talk* to their babies. Well, there's a whole vocabulary attached to a garden that these teenagers can share."

With the burned-out shell of an abandoned house just visible in the distance beyond the farm, Asenath adds, "I may be getting too old for these visions, but we have so many kids in Detroit who can't get a job—they're bound for jail, or worse. They could be in charge of their own businesses, small individualistic farms. Adolescent boys especially like to be in charge. Why not encourage them to grow apples here?"

Asenath is not alone in this idea that you could cure a lot of ills simply by making Detroit's blighted landscape productive. Crops are springing up all over inner-city Detroit, and gardeners are joining forces here in a way that raises some interesting questions. Can ordinary people armed only with shovels do what glossy casinos and office towers haven't quite managed to do: turn a Rust Belt relic around? Can a city that industry has failed actually be saved by agriculture? Is Detroit hopelessly locked into its past as the center of American auto manufacturing—or is it redefining urban living for a greener future?

These questions can only be asked because Detroit has in some sense hit bottom. Since its peak of 1.85 million residents in 1950, half of Detroit's population has fled. Thanks to a lot of sorry history that includes the closing of auto plants in the city, racial tensions that culminated in the 12th Street riot in 1967, epidemic arson in the 1980s, and the current-day woes of the American auto industry and the subprime mortgage meltdown, demolishing abandoned houses has been one of the city's most important responsibilities for decades. Even today, there are architectural corpses in the swankiest mansion districts, and about a quarter of the land in this previously great city is now vacant. Some neighborhoods have almost vanished, leaving only a sprinkling of houses behind.

But there are advantages to hitting bottom, for cities as well as individuals. Inessentials are stripped away, and a certain clarity of purpose can result. Ashley Atkinson, the sweet-faced 30-year-old dynamo who has linked hundreds of Detroit's gardeners together in a group called the Garden Resource Program Collaborative, sums up the ferocious commitment of 21st-century Detroiters this way: "The people who are here want to be here. The people who've stayed aren't going anywhere."

Talk to Detroit's gardeners, at least, and the impression is one of overpowering love for their hometown. It's also possible to see how Detroit's swaths of urban prairie, if they were actively managed, could be turned into an attraction: They yield an oddly peaceful and natural urban experience. Just a few blocks from the towers of downtown, a pheasant darts across my path. Corine Smith, a lovely young photographer who moved from the Netherlands to marry a native Detroiter, talks about the charm of Detroit's airiness: "It's nice that there's space in this city. There's none at all in Amsterdam."

And if any city in the world has a culture that knows what to *do* with abandoned land, it's Detroit. Visit 82-year-old Lillie Neal, and you'll see that culture in action. "I just love vegetables. Give me some vegetables and corn bread," she says, leading me past a junk-filled backyard to a vegetable garden so big it makes even an experienced gardener like me quail. When I ask her who helps her manage this expanse, she replies, "My younger son sometimes, but he's away this year." Then, to my increasing astonishment, she leads me across the alley, where she has two more vegetable beds almost as big.

- 

Like a lot of Detroiters, Lillie came to the city from the South, where people gardened, and the right way, too. "My grandmother," Lillie tells me, "knew all about organic food. She showed me that greens raised on fertilizer don't taste

right, while greens raised on cow manure are good."

Community garden leader Judy Gardner describes Detroit as a city shaped from its infancy by its backyard farmers. "It's always been spread out, a city of single-family homes, because it was largely built by Southern and Eastern European immigrants who wanted their gardens. Then you had all those rural Southerners coming here for jobs in the auto industry—including my dad, a hillbilly from Kentucky—bringing their gardening traditions with them."

As a result, the people I meet in their 50s and 60s remember the city of their childhoods as an urban Eden, where there were peaches overhead for the plucking, nut trees, vineyards, chickens—copious amounts of good food even when money was short. And thanks largely to Ashley Atkinson and her band of young idealists at the Garden Resource Program Collaborative, many of these people are now gardening again for the first time in decades and trying to pass on this old knowledge to Detroit's children.

Armed with limitless energy and a little money from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Ashley and her crew travel the city like modern-day Johnny Appleseeds, making sure nothing stands in the way of any Detroiter who wants to wring some produce out of the ground. "D'ja want a bench?" Ashley says to the ladies who recently created a community garden at the Adams/Butzel Recreation Center. "I can get you a bench." A few minutes later, somebody expresses a desire for a sign. "I can get you a sign," Ashley pipes in cheerily.

For Ashley and her group, their work as agricultural evangelists is appealing precisely because they can do it in a city with a rich mix of people, including the many artists and immigrants drawn to Detroit by its cheap housing and lively neighborhoods like the charming Mexicantown. Patrick Crouch, a young farmer who runs a substantial organic farm that is part of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, says that he has friends who moved to the country, only to dislike the isolation. "You don't have to move away to go back to the land, or leave the city to farm. Here I'm part of a community."

The fact is that farming in or near cities makes considerable sense in the world at large, as the political, environmental, and economic costs of trucking food thousands of miles head through the roof, and "eating local" seems increasingly like the responsible thing to do, as well as the food lover's choice. And it makes particular sense in Detroit, where there is so much unused land and very few supermarkets where decent produce can be bought. But Ashley points out, "I used to have the foolish idea that urban gardening was all about the food. Now I think that food is only a small part of it. Gardening here is about beautification, community building, friendship."

Hairstylist Nefertiti Harris says that her North Corktown community garden has helped



knit the new development she lives in into the existing neighborhood. "At first, it was just about growing vegetables to feed our families. Now it's about getting to know the neighbors, exchanging things."

"Specific gardens are made for specific reasons," Ashley says as she drives me past a pocket garden that one block association created especially to drive out the prostitution taking place on a vacant lot.

Ultimately, gardening is a way of rewriting the meaning of Detroit's open land, from the end result of the worst urban pathologies to an expression of love on the part of individual Detroiters, from a stinging rejection by those with money and power to a stubborn insistence on Detroit's value by those without.

And because vacant lots can be had for a few hundred dollars—plus the patience to sort out the vagaries of private, city, county, and state ownership—it's possible for ordinary people to have a real effect on the landscape around them. Detroit city planner Kathryn Underwood has seen hundreds of lots acquired from the city and says that when it comes to developing this green space, "the government has to catch up with the community."

Since Ashley and her group have begun sponsoring farmers' markets around the city, it's possible that one of the meanings that may eventually be written onto Detroit's vacant land is the one Asenath Andrews envisions: entrepreneurship and opportunity for the young. Kathryn tells me, however, that making permanent features of community gardens and small-scale farming is not a popular idea with everyone in city government. "Many think that the best use of public land is to put a structure on it," she says. "But redevelopment isn't just physical, it's social and spiritual, too. Gardening brings people out of their houses and connects them. It's a joy to old people and opens a whole new world for the young.

"People have such a narrow definition of what urban should be," she continues. "We have a chance now to stretch that definition in Detroit, to make the city dense where it should be but also one of the greenest cities in America, a landscape of opportunity for creative living."

That is what cities, at their best, have always been—landscapes of opportunity for creative living. It's hard not to hope that Detroit will show the way forward for other rusting industrial cities across the country—and prove that with a lot of love, labor, and some very wonderful people, they could still be fruitful and beautiful places to live.

*Michele Owens, a freelance writer living in New York, blogs about gardening at [GardenRant.com](http://GardenRant.com)*

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<http://travel.mediamatic.net/page/4035/en>

Detroit

## **Catherine Ferguson Academy**

### **A school for girls with an urban farm**

[I work here I am a fan](#)

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• [An alternative school](#) -

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## **Nobel art in Detroit**

Just a windmill on a dell

By Lisa M. Collins

What does Detroit's inner city have in common with a remote and semi-arid village in India, and the Nobel Peace Center in Norway?

Internationally known environmental artist Marjetica Potrc.

Last year Potrc won a Nobel Peace Center contest for her plan to build a system of windmills and greenery on the Nobel Center's roof. But the Oslo government said no to Potrc's proposal, so she devised a plan to export the project, choosing to do her thing at Barefoot College in India and Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit.

At Barefoot, a remarkable community school in a poor desert area, Potrc and the students installed solar panels that now power the college's computers. In Detroit, Potrc enlisted students to install a small solar panel and a little gray windmill atop Catherine Ferguson's bright red barn.

Catherine Ferguson is located in an impoverished neighborhood off Martin Luther King Boulevard, near I-96. It's a Detroit public school for teen mothers and pregnant girls run by the charismatic scholar Aseneth Andrews.

In addition to the school's main focus — placing teen moms in college and teaching them life skills along with academics — the academy also runs a full-fledged farm under the direction of science teacher Paul Weertz. Beside the student-built barn is a large field for horses, goats, chickens, a sheep and other animals, surrounded by lush gardens belonging

to individual students, a beehive and a fruit orchard. The windmill and solar panel installed by Potrc will power the barn and farm tools.

Once there, you might ask yourself: I see the value of the windmill and solar panel for educating high-schoolers, but is it art? If you say art must be beautiful, then Potrc's project will not qualify. She isn't interested in aesthetics as much as she is moved by the intersection of people and technology, architecture and design.

As she installed the system and met with students at Catherine Ferguson, Potrc was enthusiastic. "This school is fantastic, amazing," Potrc says. "We are totally inspired by Paul Weertz. The school is a model for the community. They teach by example the issues related to life. They are going back to the basics. We have to go back to the basics.

"The windmill offers hands-on educational empowerment for the students. They've demystified the technology. Anyone can do this. Everyone can do it."

Source: [\*Detroit Metro Times\*](#)



[An Urban Farm](#) -

Image taken from: [Google Images](#)

***Contact information***

*2750 Selden St*

*48208 Detroit*

*United States*

[\*view on map\*](#)

phone 3135964766



<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1914991-2,00.html>



**Urban Animal Husbandry**

By [Jeninne Lee-St. John](#) Monday, Aug. 17, 2009

Novella Carpenter who lives in Oakland, California with dwarf goats.  
Mark Richards for TIME

(2 of 2)

Of course, not everyone wants to get that close to their food sources. Dwarf goats in particular have been a point of contention. They smell bad and can wreak havoc if they escape, opponents say; some also worry that allowing goats will pave the way for legalizing llamas and cows in cities. Goat advocates, who note that only horned males emit musk, say the ruminants are gentle enough to be walked on a leash and that they generate high-quality manure, which can be used as fertilizer.

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## Urban Farming Around the World

### Photos



### Cow-Pooling

The movement has led to heated debates in city-council meetings over the definitions of livestock, small animals and farm animals. The result: a hodgepodge of animal-ownership laws across the nation and even within a state. This spring in North Carolina, for example, Asheville voted to allow temporary permits for goats to clear vegetation, while Charlotte banned them from properties smaller than a quarter of an acre — despite supporters showing up at a city-council meeting with signs reading I LOVE MY PYGMY GOAT.

Those enthusiasts may have taken a page from the godmother of goat lovers, Jennie Grant, owner of Brownie and Snowflake, who founded the Goat Justice League two years ago while pushing Seattle to legalize miniature goats. It is now permissible to have three on a 5,000-sq.-ft. lot, and some city departments have hired goats to clear blackberry brambles. "Part of my lobbying effort included bringing fresh chèvre to city-council members' offices," she says.

Locavore yuppies and suburban soccer moms aren't the only ones committing to animal husbandry. Catherine Ferguson Academy, a Detroit high school for teens who are pregnant or have already become mothers, has for years had a working farm adjacent to campus. The school considers gardening and raising animals integral to its curriculum. Under the tutelage of life-sciences teacher Paul Weertz, the young women built a barn one year and provide daily care for rabbits, horses, goats, chickens, ducks, turkeys and peacocks. The students recently acquired a pig and, says principal Asenath Andrews, they're going to eat it.

Andrews hopes farming teaches the girls to be more entrepreneurial, well-rounded moms. "Breast-feeding, which is definitely not a popular adolescent activity, is looked on differently by the girls who experience the lessons with baby rabbits," she says. A teachable moment happened the day students broke open an egg containing what appeared to be a viable chick, which the girls frantically tried to save, even calling in the

school nurse. The chick died, but the episode sparked a thoughtful conversation about premature human babies, the risks they face and the possibility that saving ailing preemies isn't always merciful. It was one of her most fulfilling days as an educator, Andrews says. "If we have one of those discussions a year, it's worth having a goat — or 10 goats — at the school."

Of course, which animal is most valuable to the downtown farmer depends on whom you ask. "[Rabbits] are the ideal urban farm animal," says Carpenter, because "they can feed almost exclusively on Dumpstered items like lettuce, stale bread, etc." Seattle Tilth's Thornton thinks that ducks are better for gardens than chickens and that they provide tastier eggs. "I think the duck is the future," she says. Game on, chicken lovers.

[See the top 10 animal stories of 2008.](#)

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<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090920/OPINION02/909200444&template=printart>

September 20, 2009

## Academy offers a model for all Detroit schools

By *JEFF GERRITT*  
*FREE PRESS COLUMNIST*

Mayor Dave Bing wants to bring Detroit's failing public school system, with a dropout rate approaching 70%, under mayoral control. It's a good idea: Detroit's children deserve a lot better, and no city can rebound without high-quality public schools and the middle-class tax base they attract. School boards and superintendents have failed to provide the accountability and leadership needed to educate the many disadvantaged students they serve.

But before Bing, a wealthy, 65-year-old businessman from the suburbs, takes over one of America's poorest and most troubled big-city school districts, he'll need to get schooled himself. I suggest a visit to Catherine Ferguson Academy, an alternative, all-girls high school, where practically all of the students are mothers or pregnant, and more than 90% are eligible for free or discounted lunches.

Tucked in a poor, near west-side neighborhood, the academy looks like many other urban schools. It's housed in a dingy and dim 90-year-old building. Many seats in the auditorium, where a rousing opening assembly took place on Monday, are stained and ripped.

Still, despite contending with poverty and parenthood, 90% of the students graduate, and all of the graduates go on to two- or four-year colleges. A kinetic vibe fills the scrubbed hallways and classrooms. At the start of the day, students hurry through freshly painted doors, feeling safe and supported.

Dreams are born and nurtured here, as the late rapper Tupac Shakur put it, like a rose growing through the concrete.

## Familiarity breeds accountability



Named after a freed slave from New York City who dedicated her life to education, Catherine Ferguson Academy was designated a Breakthrough High School in 2004 -- one of just 12 recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals for outstanding achievement among schools with high poverty rates. Its success is widely attributed to Principal Asenath Andrews, 59, a former art teacher who took charge of the school when its doors opened 24 years ago.

Today, Andrews still knows most of her nearly 300 students by name, and she expects her 15 teachers and support staff to take a personal interest in all of them. Smaller class sizes of 18 make it easier for teachers to work with individual students.

"It's hard for a student to skip school when the principal and teachers know her," Andrews told me. "I have an extraordinary staff."

## **Bodies and minds**

Nearly one in three Detroit females between the ages of 15 and 19 has at least one child, but Catherine Ferguson Academy is one of only a handful of schools in the nation dedicated to serving school-age mothers. Students enroll by choice, some after hearing about the academy from friends or older sisters.

By necessity, the school is part social services center. It includes an on-site clinic, two nurses, counseling, parenting and personal development classes, and four early education classrooms for more than 150 infants and toddlers. While their mothers attend class, babies rock to classical music and listen to stories designed to build vocabularies. Representatives from a federally funded program for young mothers visit the school every Wednesday, checking babies' weight and providing mothers with information on nutrition.

By changing the lives of young mothers, the school helps break a cycle of poverty that can span generations.

"Often, these girls are the first in their families to graduate from high school," Andrews said. "But they aren't the last."

Each student is assigned a homeroom teacher who stays with her until graduation. School counselors help students apply for college admissions and financial aid.

Single-sex enrollment and a dress code -- plain white tops and navy or black bottoms -- eliminate two sources of classroom drama: clothes and boys.

The school grounds also include a four-acre urban garden and farm with ducks, rabbits, chickens, goats, geese, turkeys and even a horse, providing a natural setting to learn biology or build a picnic table.

Students grow raspberries, sweet potatoes, egg plants, broccoli, spinach, peas and carrots, as well as learn about subjects such as recycling. The school sells the vegetables at Eastern Market.

Ashley Rodgers credits the school with saving her life. The 20-year-old senior who started high school at Northwestern, got pregnant at 14 and had a son at 15. She dropped out of school twice, for a total of two years, because of family troubles.

The youngest of five children, Rodgers was raised by her grandmother, who died six years ago. Her father was in prison for most of her life, while some of her siblings dropped in and out of jail. After her grandmother died, Rodgers felt alone and overwhelmed.

"I couldn't focus," she told me. "It's no excuse, but I was in a vulnerable state. I didn't have anyone in my ear saying, you should wait until you get married, or you should have protected sex."

"If I had continued at Northwestern, I wouldn't have made it. I feel at ease here. The teachers made me want to be here and do better. They wouldn't let me fail."

Now a solid B student, Rodgers has applied to Wayne County Community College District and plans to become a social worker or photographer. Her 5-year-old son attends kindergarten. "I want to do so much better for myself, and my son," she said.

## Six lessons

Mayor Bing and district administrators could learn a few things at Catherine Ferguson. What makes the academy successful could work at other schools.

- First, principals are the key to a school's success. "As the principal goes, so does the school," said Sharif Shakrani, director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University. Districts should use outstanding principals like Andrews, including those who have retired, to mentor and guide younger administrators.
- Second, smaller is better. Disadvantaged students need smaller class sizes and more attention, especially at the elementary level. Class sizes of 18, instead of 25 or 30, and high schools with enrollments of about 400, instead of 2,000, enable teachers to provide the help and attention students need.

Of course, smaller classes and schools increase per-pupil costs. If Bing can't find the money, he could do what St. Petersburg, Fla., Mayor Rick Baker has done: Use his business connections to get companies to adopt disadvantaged schools and raise money for them.

- Third, teachers must understand the problems their students bring to class. Nearly 40% of Detroit's children live in poverty. They're more likely to come to school hungry and distracted. Their families tend to move frequently and many have incarcerated parents. They see more violence, and they are less likely to have advantages like home libraries, computers and travel.

More universities need to do what MSU did this year: Start an urban education program that prepares teachers for the special problems of urban classrooms.

- Fourth, single-sex schools can work. They're not for everyone, but they allow schools to eliminate distractions and social competition, improving academics and increasing opportunities for student leadership.
- Fifth, it's important for schools to celebrate their students' individual and collective success.

Few people hear about the positive things students, teachers and schools in Detroit accomplish. Principals complain that journalists don't show up until the cops come. Parents, students and educators need examples of excellence and achievement -- not just a steady diet of failure, mismanagement and corruption.

- Finally, teachers and principals must believe in these children and, yes, love them almost like their own.

"When you change the expectations, you change lives," Andrews told me. "My philosophy is that, if I'd want it for my own kids, I'd want it for them."

That commitment is creating success at Catherine Ferguson Academy. Maybe the mayor can experience it there and spread it to other schools.

Contact Jeff Gerritt at 313-222-6585 or [jgerritt@freepress.com](mailto:jgerritt@freepress.com).

## Additional Facts

Forum: Keeping kids in school

Vanguard Community Development Corporation, Detroit Public Schools and Wayne County Community College District will sponsor an education forum to improve Detroit's 25% high school graduation rate on Saturday, Nov. 14, at WCCCD's downtown Detroit campus, 1001 W. Fort St.

The forum, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., will include a panel of high school and community college students, as well as legislators and community leaders in education, business, law enforcement and corrections.

"Boys to Men" will make policy recommendations on how to improve Detroit's graduation rates, with a focus on retaining the disproportionate number of African-American males who are not graduating, said Bishop Edgar L. Vann, chairman of Vanguard Community Development Corporation.

Among those speaking will be Robert Bobb, Detroit public schools emergency financial manager.

For more information, call 313-872-7831 or go to [www.vanguardcdc.org](http://www.vanguardcdc.org). Schools Pave New Path for Pregnant Students Run Date: 09/21/07 By Anna Clark  
WeNews correspondent



Catherine Ferguson Academy

Credit: Catherine Ferguson Academy.

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3322>

*Amid a dearth of highly regarded schools for pregnant teens, Detroit's Catherine Ferguson Academy and New Haven's Polly T. McCabe Center boast standout graduation rates and a host of rare services. Second of two stories about "P-schools."*

DETROIT (WOMENSENEWS)--Asenath Andrews is getting phone calls from students. But that's not unusual for the first weeks of the school year. In fact, the principal of Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit expects it.

"I give my home phone and cell numbers out every year at our orientation assembly," said Andrews, a Detroit native. "New students don't always believe it. I had three girls call me today just to see if it was real."

One of the few schools in the nation for pregnant and parenting teens and their children-- Andrews knows of only three other accredited schools of this kind in the United States-- Catherine Ferguson can brag about a 90-percent graduation rate and 100-percent college acceptance rate for those that do earn their diplomas. The school stands out in a struggling Detroit public school system that has 53 schools slated for closure by next summer.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, based in Washington, D.C., estimates that one-third of teen mothers eventually complete high school, and only 1.5 percent receives a college degree by her 30th birthday. The group also says that nearly 80 percent of teen mothers eventually receive government-subsidized child support--referred to colloquially as welfare--most within five years of giving birth.

In 2004, Catherine Ferguson was one of only eight schools to be named a Breakthrough High School by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The honor recognizes schools that are more than 50-percent students of color, more than 50-percent students who qualify for free and reduced-meal prices, and with a 90-percent or better rate of graduation and college acceptance.

The 20-year-old first-come, first-serve program can host up to 400 students and 200 children. Students are eligible for enrollment from the time they become pregnant to the time they graduate, offering a consistency that Andrews says is vital if the young women are going to beat the daunting drop-out statistics for teen mothers.

## **Education Tailored for Mothers**

Catherine Ferguson has implemented a number of initiatives unavailable at other P-schools or mainstream schools.

For newborns, babies and toddlers there is campus child care and early education. For children who reach age 4 before their mothers graduate, the school partners with a nearby nursery so they can be among children their own age.

Child care staff extends hours for those who take extra evening classes at Wayne County Community College, located less than a mile a way from Catherine Ferguson Academy.

Women Infants and Children, a federal food program for low-income "nutritionally at risk" people, has a site in the school offering health information and counseling along with coupons for supplemental foods.

The school maintains a nursing and midwifery clinic that provides pre- and post-natal care to students.

Catherine Ferguson also operates on a quarterly system over nine months, rather than the traditional two-semester calendar so that students with high absences due to pregnancy complications don't risk losing credit for half the academic year and slipping too far behind their peers.

It has a four-day schedule with Fridays set aside for appointments or making up absences.

## **Parenting Education Required**

Parenting education is a required staple of every student's schedule and features a weekly meeting between the mothers and their children's teachers.

In a design Andrews calls "spiraling up," students spend one week each quarter engaging in topics that affect both the mother and her child, such as discipline; pre-literacy education for their children; and management of time, anger and money. The week on anger management in the first quarter asks, "What is anger, and how does it affect you?" The student will return to anger management in the second quarter to question how her anger affects her child.

Each student is required to choose at least one career to explore in 10-week internships outside the school.

"The placements are amazing," Andrews said. "Girls who want to do O.R. nursing actually go into an operating room. For a while, we had a big group into undertaking, and now we have a CSI crew interested in forensics; those placements are harder to find."

And then there's the farm.

The agri-science program has grown from a small garden to an urban farm right outside the school's building. It comes complete with vegetables, chickens, sheep, bees, worms, ducks, goats, turkeys, rabbits and horses, and is one of the most popular sites on urban agriculture tours through Detroit. Catherine Ferguson's schoolyard boasts a barn that students built.

While students dig in the dirt and deepen their knowledge of life cycles, Andrews says they also bond with their children.

"We went apple picking," Andrews said. "And the next day we made pie and the next day we made sauce and the next day we made jelly. There's lots and lots to be learned from that. And you hope the mom will continue to experience that with their kid. They can't do that if they don't have that experience of their own."

## **Connecticut's Model P-School**

Polly T. McCabe Center in New Haven, Conn., is another of the rare success stories in public school programming for pregnant teens.

While Catherine Ferguson is a diploma-granting public school, Polly McCabe is a transitional program housed within New Haven Public Schools serving 40 to 50 students at a time in 7th through 12th grades.

Students spend about two months at Polly McCabe and then re-enter traditional school. It is the most common program template in school districts that acknowledge the needs of pregnant and parenting teens.

With only a short time at Polly McCabe high absences related to pregnancy and consistent academic progress is a challenge for students.

Nonetheless, the seven seniors enrolled at Polly McCabe all graduated in 2006. Eighty-six percent of its graduates in 2005 went on to two- or four-year colleges beating the state average by 7 percentage points, according to the most recent statistics available from the Connecticut Department of Education.

The center offers a child care program supervised by a pediatric nurse and early childhood specialist. This year's students are scheduled for a wellness-stress management class after lunch during the fifth period, the time of day when the center knows students are most likely to be in attendance.

At Polly McCabe, the teacher-student ratio is 1-to-8; the Connecticut average is 1-to-16, according to Public School Review.

Personal attention and active consideration of the whole student--recognizing her as a student, a mother and a teen--is key to Polly McCabe's success, according to researchers from Yale University and the University of Virginia.

Their 2003 report to the Washington-based American Psychological Association found that students "appeared to identify with the staff and to consider new life options based on an assumption that they should finish high school. Staff availability to help solve practical problems that might interfere with their ability to remain in school is also important."

*Anna Clark is a freelance journalist in Detroit. She maintains the literary and social justice Web site, Isak (<http://www.isak.typepad.com/>).*

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors@womensenews.org](mailto:editors@womensenews.org).

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## Visual Biographies

[http://www3.jkl.fi/taidemuseo/graphica\\_creativa/2009/visual\\_biographies.htm](http://www3.jkl.fi/taidemuseo/graphica_creativa/2009/visual_biographies.htm)

Pamela DeLaura, JenClare Gawaran & Evan Larson: Visual Biographies - Students from the D.P.S. Cathrine Ferguson Academy, Detroit, 2008, cyanotype

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**Students From the Catherine Ferguson Academy, Detroit  
Pamela DeLaura, JenClare Gawaran  
& Evan Larson  
USA**

[photos](#)

The collaborative project, Visual Biographies was initially conceived as part of an exhibition, Shrinking Cities [?] W.S.U Responds. The W.S.U. exhibition was created in response to the international traveling exhibition, Shrinking Cities. Shrinking Cities, funded by the Federal Cultural Foundation in Germany, focuses on population decline and Urban deterioration in Detroit, USA, Ivanovo, Russia, Halle/Leipzig, Germany, Manchester and Liverpool England. Shrinking Cities, was scheduled to exhibit concurrently in three prominent Detroit venues, including Wayne State University's Elaine L. Jacob Gallery. Detroit and New York City were the only U.S. cities to host the international Shrinking Cities.

The majority of the international exhibition was formatted on innovative, information design to image data on population decline and tragic events of the represented cities. Instead of hosting the international exhibition a group of Wayne State University faculty and graduate students decided to add an important “insider’s” viewpoint to the scholarship in the Shrinking Cities catalog, with conceptually driven and aesthetically oriented works which incorporate the social, political and economic realities of the city of Detroit.

The negative international perception and representations of Detroit are so numerous and common they are viewed by Detroiters as cliché’s. As artists/collaborators/Detroiters we were intent our project be an effective means of beginning a dialogue about Detroit in a more humanistic, nuanced way.

Detroit’s identity as “place” is recognized internationally as a city plagued by longstanding economic, social, and political crisis. Statistical data is used to construct this identity of “place”, but statistical models do not provide particular information about “place.” Detroit possesses a dynamic indelible spirit that continues to endure despite ongoing problems. This dynamic spirit is undeniable, yet only identified and revealed by its citizens.

Visual Biographies: Students from D.P.S. Catherine Ferguson Academy, was created to make a visible, individual, and intimately interactive project about a group of Detroit teenage mothers often identified and portrayed by non-visible statistical data. The Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit defies all statistics. It is a public high school where minorities represent a majority of the student body and founded specifically as a school for pregnant teens and young single mothers. An urban farm that provides a unique learning experience surrounds the school building. The nurturing learning environment created by the staff, along with an innovative curriculum continues to beat all the statistics for students of their demographics. Over 90% of their students graduate and go on to college, and less than 15% become pregnant again before graduation. As artists and citizens of a “shrinking city”, our intent was to create a work of art that opposes the corporate culture of numbers and reveal Detroit from a unique vantage point. The remarkable staff of Catherine Ferguson Academy and the students represented in Visual Biographies, are a part of the collective spirit that makes Detroit such a dynamic city.

Detroit is a living city with an ongoing story of fortitude and ingenious problem solving. Visual Biographies, has been a catalyst for conversation albeit in a small way. We hope Visual Biographies; will continue to be exhibited, as we would like to continue to extend the dialogue towards a collective conscience of ingenious problem solving.





<http://video.aol.co.uk/video-detail/miracle-school-for-teen-mothers/548743706>

imbed link

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**African-American Religion: A Documentary History Project**  
**Continental Phase**  
**Sample Documents**

## **African-American Religion**

### ***A Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents***

**“Where Katy Lived, the Whole Aspect of the Neighborhood Was Changed”: Lewis Tappan’s**

# Obituary for Catherine Ferguson (1854)

(Working Draft, January 2003)

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## Introduction

When Catherine Ferguson, a New York City black woman devoted to Christian education and the care of orphans, died in 1854, her death prompted the document that follows, an obituary written by Lewis Tappan, the eminent evangelical antislavery activist.<sup>1</sup> He tells the story of a child born a slave, her mother sold away by their New York master, a child who early on seeks both her freedom and admission to the church, and having gained both devotes her long life to caring for neglected children and teaching religion while earning a living as a cake maker. Tappan also says she was the first person to have founded a Sunday school in the city. This obituary led to further recognition.

A biography and portrait of her appeared in a book published the following year, Benson J. Lossing's *Our Countrymen, or Brief Memoirs of Eminent Americans*, which was reprinted many times up through 1891.<sup>2</sup> Her inspirational life was also published by the American Tract Society under the title *Katy Ferguson; or What a Poor Colored Woman May Do*.<sup>3</sup> In 1907 Horace G. Miller, the pastor of the black Presbyterian Mt. Tabor Church in New York, wrote a letter to the *New York Age* extolling Catherine Ferguson's life, saying that Ferguson organized the first sabbath school in Manhattan in 1793, relating plans to build a religious center in her honor, and seeking funds from both whites and blacks for the project.<sup>4</sup> In 1920, in a textbook on the history of education in the United States, Ellwood P. Cubberley says that in 1793 "Katy Ferguson's 'School for the Poor' opened in New York," but provides no documentation for the assertion.<sup>5</sup> That she was the first to start a Sunday school in that city was once again claimed in a 1923 issue of the *Southern Workman*, in the title given to a recollection dating from some years before 1909; the recollection does not itself make the claim.<sup>6</sup> In 1926 the claim was renewed in a collection of biographies of black women compiled by Hallie Q. Brown, a president of the National Association of Colored Women, and again in the 1993 *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*.<sup>7</sup>

Tappan's obituary, based on an interview he had had with her four years before, on the precise date of March 25, 1850, appeared first in the *New York Daily Tribune* on July 20, 1854. He then put it in the August issue of the *American Missionary* with two revisions, changing her early street address to 51 Warren Street rather than 52 and age at death to 80 rather than 75, which by extrapolation gives a birth year of 1774 rather than 1779. Nothing written about Ferguson while she was still alive has yet been found to

corroborate or amend his story, so his and others' claims about her life and particularly the dates of its events have not been verified. Nevertheless his account is credible. Tappan was more likely than many to be reliable: his business profession of establishing credit ratings was the first of its kind and highly respected, and his carefully maintained journals and letterbooks testify to his orderly ways. Support for the story comes from Benson Lossing's having included, in his brief biography of Ferguson, a recollection by Isaac Ferris, chancellor of New York University, that while a theological student he used to come to Ferguson's rooms to help instruct the students in her Sunday school.

Catherine Ferguson's life, whether begun in 1774 or 1779, parallels a period in New York City's history that dates from its devastation during the Revolutionary War, a war that left it a "ravaged and partially destroyed seaport town," as historian Raymond Mohl says, its population confined to the lower tip of Manhattan, a city which then rapidly expanded in area and especially in population over the first half of the nineteenth century. It became a city of immigrants, both from elsewhere in the nation and from abroad, and this quick increase in population produced challenging problems with poverty on a much greater scale than before. Coping with this poverty entailed traditional methods like maintaining an alms house or taking food and wood to people in need, but also an array of new approaches including those emphasizing Christian education. Sabbath schools, whose initial focus was secular, teaching children and adults to read and meeting on the Sundays because that was the day when such students were available, soon turned into Christian Sunday schools, emphasizing study of the scriptures. The more secular training was done in the new Lancastrian schools, following an English technique for instructing very large groups of poor children with the aid of older students.<sup>8</sup>

In several respects, Ferguson's social welfare interests paralleled those of the family that bought her freedom, Isabella Graham and daughter and son-in-law Joanna and Divie Bethune, prospering immigrants from Scotland and leaders in benevolent causes. All were concerned about orphans, untended children, and poor children and adults who did not attend church, both blacks and whites alike.<sup>9</sup> Graham came to New York in 1789, a widow who supported herself and her children by establishing a private school for girls. She joined what was known as the Scotch Presbyterian Church, then a congregation of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian denomination, as did Divie Bethune, who arrived in 1792 and became a wealthy merchant. (The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church was created in 1782 by a merger of some of the American congregations of the Associate Presbytery and the Reformed Presbytery, small Scottish denominations representing the "Seceder" and "Covenanter" traditions respectively. In 1822, Associate Reformed churches in the Northeast, including New York City, joined with the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.) It was in 1789 that Catherine Ferguson also joined this same Scotch Presbyterian Church at age fifteen.<sup>10</sup> She then, according to Tappan's account, gained her freedom at age sixteen or seventeen, in 1790 or 1791 (assuming a birth year of 1774), and might have worked for Isabella Graham.<sup>11</sup> When Ferguson married at age 18 (perhaps in 1792) and had two children, the time corresponded to the 1797 start of Graham's first charitable enterprise, the Society for the Relief of Poor Women with Small Children. According to Tappan, Ferguson soon lost her children and presumably her

husband as well, as no further mention of him appears, and perhaps she became involved with this society as either a client or a distributor of food and clothing.

While 1793 seems early for Ferguson to have begun a Sunday school, there is evidence that Isabella Graham began such a school with her daughter in 1803 to teach reading and writing and give religious instruction.<sup>12</sup> In 1804, when the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children purchased a house, a room was reserved for teaching the children.<sup>13</sup> Graham went on to found or help found the Orphan Asylum Society in 1806, the Magdalen Society in 1811, the Society for the Promotion of Industry Among the Poor in 1814, and a Sunday School for adults just before her death in July 1814. Her daughter continued her work. Divie Bethune was also connected with the Humane Society, founded in 1787, involved with many other benevolent causes, on his own imported bibles from England for distribution to the poor, and in 1812 helped found the Society for Supporting the Gospel Among the Poor of the City of New York. Early in 1816 Joanna and Divie Bethune reported they had a school for black adults taught by their family along with the many others formed by the Female Union Society for the Promotion of Sabbath Schools, which Joanna Bethune helped organize.<sup>14</sup>

Catherine Ferguson's involvement in these organizations is not confirmed, but as Allen Hartvik suggests, she might well have assisted with the sabbath school held at their Murray Street church, a congregation of the Associated Reform Church denomination, organized under the leadership of John Mitchell Mason in 1810.<sup>15</sup> In Tappan's obituary, this sabbath school actually began at Ferguson's home, and was moved to the church after its minister John Mason discovered what she was doing. For all four of them the connection between religious faith and charitable work was very close, the work a manifestation of the faith. The societies formed may have been interdominational, in the sense of including members from various Protestant churches (Elizabeth Seton, then still an Episcopalian, worked with Graham at the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, later converting to Roman Catholicism and canonized in 1975) but hardly secular.

If Ferguson was part of the city's story of coping with poverty, both as subject and helper, she was also, apparently, part of an independent black self-help movement. As her story suggests, she on her own would see a need and address it. Though Graham and the Bethunes seemed to have formed organizations that dealt with both blacks and whites, it appears that Ferguson worked not only with them but also independently of them. There are many other contemporary examples of blacks who worked both in collaboration with whites but also independently.

One concerns another black Presbyterian, John Teasman (1754–1815), who was hired in 1797 by the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves to teach at its African Free School. He and the white schoolmaster then added on a successful evening school for adults, and in 1799 he became principal. Robert J. Swan argues that the society's very tight control over the black students and their families, its penchant "to be the religious and moral guardian of the African race was crucial to the transition from black subservience to independence and self-reliance."<sup>16</sup> In 1787 the Manumission Society's refusal to encourage a collateral black religious society became the catalyst for

the formation of a separate black church, which then established its own schools. In 1808, when the new Embargo Act affected seamen and workers, John Teasman led the organization of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief; other blacks formed similar groups. Perhaps for this independent activity, Teasman lost his job a year later with the African Free School. He and his wife then created their own school. In 1810, when some members of the Presbyterian and Reformed Dutch churches in the city organized the Sabbath Society for Catechising Africans, they trained black children in the Westminster Shorter Catechism “in a school room in the rear of No. 7 Murray-street, occupied by Mr. Teasman, a pious descendant of Africa,” who warmly supported the society and frequently took part in its work.<sup>17</sup> No direct connection between Ferguson and Teasman has been found, but it seems likely they would have known each other.<sup>18</sup> Both seem to have worked both independently and in collaboration with the white benevolence movement.

Tappan’s account, like the others of the time, says little about Ferguson’s life in the three decades after the eighteen-teens. Evidently, she was busy taking care of children in need as well as making cakes for sale and conducting her prayer meetings. By 1850 she was interested in Tappan’s American Missionary Association and the missionaries who went to Africa. But her influence remained local. Shortly after she died, Tappan made an entry about her in his journal. “[July] 21st. Went to the late residence of Katy Ferguson to look over a barrel of pamphlets she left. By permission took away a few. A little girl in the neighborhood came in & said, ‘Please give me a book to remember Aunt Katy by.’ I gave her a small book.”<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

1. While the *Tribune* obituary is signed simply “L.T.” his authorship can be established in Lewis Tappan’s diary: “Wrote, a few days since, an obituary of Catharine Ferguson for the Independent. It did not appear in that paper this week. Took a copy to the Tribune & it was inserted.” Lewis Tappan, journal entry, July 21, 1854, in journal for July 1, 1853–April 18, 1855, p. 226, *The Papers of Lewis Tappan, 1809–1903*, microfilm, reel 2, fr. 198, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. A clipping of the obituary accompanies the entry. A two-sentence notice of her death had first appeared in the *New York Times*, July 13, 1854, p. 8, noting the funeral was scheduled for that same day. [\[return to text\]](#)

2. “Catherine Ferguson,” in Benson J. Lossing, *Our Countrymen, Or Brief Memoirs of Eminent Americans* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1855), 404–405. Reprint information is based on entries in the website OCLC FirstSearch, as of 7 January 2003. [\[return to text\]](#)

3. The tract was anonymously written, published by the Tract Society in Boston, no date provided. Ferguson was also recognized in an 1856 biography of her early pastor, John Mitchell Mason, the information evidently based on Tappan’s obituary: Jacob Van Vechten, *Memoirs of John M. Mason, D.D., S.T.P.* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1856), 67. [\[return to text\]](#)

4. Horace G. Miller to Editor, New York, April 2, 1907, “Catherine Ferguson’s Work To Be Fittingly Commemorated,” *New York Age*, April 11, 1907, p. 2. Miller’s church connection is described in Theodore Fiske Savage in his *The Presbyterian Church in New York City* (New York: Presbytery of New York, 1949), 179–80. According to Savage, Mt. Tabor Church dissolved in 1912. What became of the project is not known. [\[return to text\]](#)

5. *History of Education, Educational Progress Considered as a Phase of the Development and Spread of Western Civilization* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), 659. This claim is repeated in Savage, *Presbyterian Church in New York City*, 58, and in Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 384. [\[return to text\]](#)

6. Mrs. John W. Olcott, "Recollections of the First Sunday School in New York City," *Southern Workman* 52, no. 9 (September 1923): 463. Another article from this journal concerns a home for black unwed mothers established in New York City in 1920 and named for Ferguson: William E. Clark, "The Katy Ferguson Home," *Southern Workman* 52, no. 5 (May 1923): 228–30. [\[return to text\]](#)

7. "Catherine Ferguson 1749(?)–1854 Founder of the First Sunday School Movement in New York City," in *Homespun Heroines and other Women of Distinction* (Xenia, Ohio: Aldine, 1926; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 2–4. This account cites Elwood Cubberley's 1920 reference to Katy Ferguson's School for the Poor opening in 1793, noted above. Audrey Johnson, "Ferguson, Catherine (Katy) (c. 1774–1854)," in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1:426. [\[return to text\]](#)

8. A clear account of the city's poverty is Raymond A. Mohl, *Poverty in New York 1783–1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); the quoted passage is on p. 52. On the history of sabbath and Sunday schools, see Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution 1790–1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). [\[return to text\]](#)

9. Isabella Graham (1742–1814) had lived in Canada as a young wife of a physician then moved to Antigua; in each location she took a personal interest in the Indians or blacks around her. Her future son-in-law Divie Bethune (1771–1824) also lived for a time in the West Indies, in Tobago. Her daughter Joanna, in recounting her struggle with religious faith, remembered envying a black man in the garret overhead who seemed happy singing hymns. On the Graham/Bethune family see: *The Unpublished Letters and Correspondence of Mrs. Isabella Graham, From the Year 1767 to 1814 . . .*, ed. Joanna Bethune (New York: John S. Taylor, 1838); *The Power of Faith, Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the Late Mrs. Isabella Graham*, new ed. (New York: American Tract Society, 1843; repr. New York: Garland, 1987); George W. Bethune [son], *Memoirs of Mrs. Joanna Bethune* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1863), 69, for story of the black man singing hymns; "George W. Bethune," in Henry Fowler, ed., *The American Pulpit: Sketches Biographical and Descriptive, of Living American Preachers . . .* (New York: J. M. Fairchild, 1856), 389–400; Abraham Rynier Van Nest, *Memoir of Rev. George W. Bethune* (New York: Sheldon, 1867). [\[return to text\]](#)

10. Savage, *Presbyterian Church in New York City*, 200–201. Savage, who may have had access to the records of the Scotch Presbyterian Church, which in 1917 became the Second Presbyterian Church, provides this date and age at which Ferguson joined, lending support to her birth year as 1774. He also relates the story of Ferguson fearing she would not be allowed to join the long communion table in the center aisle and the pastor John Mason coming down from the pulpit and leading her by hand to her place there. He views this event as Dr. Mason's way of "making clear to his congregation there was to be no color line" (p. 200). Since the church had a separate gallery for blacks, according to Savage's description of the building (p. 199), Ferguson's fear of exclusion was reasonable. [\[return to text\]](#)

11. So speculates Allen Hartvik in his article, "Catherine Ferguson, Black Founder of a Sunday-School," *Negro History Bulletin* 35, no. 8 (December 1972): 176–77. [\[return to text\]](#)

12. *Power of Faith*, 228; Boylan, *Sunday School*, 1988, 9. [\[return to text\]](#)

13. Dorothy G. Becker, "Isabella Graham and Joanna Bethune: Trailblazers of Organized Women's Benevolence," *Social Service Review* 61, no. 2 (June 1987): 319–336, 325–26. [\[return to text\]](#)

14. Mohl, *Poverty in New York*, 135, 148, 193–94. Isabella Graham (1742–1814) herself had been a widow with small children when her husband died in 1773: see her entry in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 7:474–75, on this and the societies she supported. See also John Carroll Power, *The Rise and Progress of Sunday Schools: A Biography of Robert Raikes and William Fox* (New York: Sheldon, 1863), 262–66. On the Female Union Society, see Page Putnam Miller, “Women in the Vanguard of the Sunday School Movement,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 311–25. [\[return to text\]](#)

15. Hartvik, 177. [\[return to text\]](#)

16. Robert J. Swan, “John Teasman: African-American Educator and the Emergence of Community in Early Black New York City, 1787–1815,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 331–56, quoted passage on p. 340. [\[return to text\]](#)

17. “Sabbath Society for Catechising Africans,” *Christian’s Magazine* 4, no. 12 (December 1811), 681–83, quoted passage on p. 683. [\[return to text\]](#)

18. Murray Street, where Ferguson went to church, was just a block away from Warren Street, where she lived. According to Swan, “John Teasman,” 351, in 1812 the Teasmans moved their school, sponsored by the Mutual Relief Society, several blocks uptown; it was known as the Walker Street Academy. [\[return to text\]](#)

19. Lewis Tappan, journal entry, July 21, 1854, in journal for July 1, 1853–Apr. 18, 1855, p. 226, in *The Papers of Lewis Tappan, 1809–1903*, microfilm, reel 2, fr. 198, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [\[return to text\]](#)



CATHERINE FERGUSON

Benson J. Lossing, *Our Countrymen, Or Brief Memoirs of Eminent Americans* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1855), 405.

## Document

[Lewis Tappan], “Catharine Ferguson,” *American Missionary* 8, no. 10 (August 1854): 85–86, annotated clipping in Lewis Tappan’s journal for July 1, 1853–Apr. 18, 1855, p. 299, in *The Papers of Lewis Tappan, 1809–1903*, microfilm, reel 2, fr.

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Died, on Tuesday, 11th instant, at her house, 74 Thompson street, Widow Catharine Ferguson, after a brief illness, aged about 80 years.<sup>1</sup>

The departure of this remarkable woman should be commemorated by an obituary notice worthy of such a mother in Israel, and such an active, life-long, Christian philanthropist. It is hoped that a memoir will be presented to the public. Thousands in this community have heard of or known *Katy Ferguson*, the aged colored woman, who, in more vigorous life was the celebrated cake-maker for weddings and other social parties. But many who have eaten her unrivalled cake, and been edified by her sensible chat or pious discourse, may be ignorant of the eminent virtues and extraordinary good deeds which crowned her life. It is due, therefore, to the cause of Christ, of philanthropy, and the people of color especially, that her distinguished services should be recorded. The facts contained in this notice were taken down from Mrs. Ferguson's own lips, March 25, 1850.

Katy was born a slave. Her mother gave birth to her on her passage from Virginia to this city. Katy Williams—for that was her name—was “owned” by R. B., who lived on Water street, and was an elder in one of the New-York City Presbyterian Churches. “R. B.,” said Katy, “sold my mother away, but I remember that before we were torn asunder, she knelt down, laid her hand on my head, and gave me to God.”

Katy never saw her mother again. Her mistress told her that if she was as good as her mother, she would do well. Katy felt keenly the loss of her mother. The recollection of her own anguish when separated from her, made her, she said, feel compassion for children. When ten years old, she told her master, R. B., that if he would give her her liberty, she would serve the Lord for ever. But he did not do it.

Katy was never taught to read. “My mistress,” she said, “would not let me learn; and once she said to me, ‘You know more now than my daughters.’” One of her mistress' sons asked Katy to teach him geography, etc. She exclaimed, “I can't!” He replied, “Yes, you can; if I don't read right in the Bible, or if I don't say my catechism right, you tell quick enough.”

At fourteen years of age she was converted to God. When under conviction of sin she determined to go and see the Rev. John M. Mason, whose church she then attended. She was afraid to go, was unwilling it should be known in the family that she went, and tremblingly apprehensive that she could not get access to Dr. Mason, or that he would not pay attention to her. She, however, summoned resolution enough to go. “While I stood at the door ringing the bell,” said she, “I can not describe my feelings; and when the door opened, and Dr. Mason himself stood before me, I trembled from head to foot. If he had spoken harshly to me, or had repulsed me, I should almost died of grief, and perhaps have lost my soul.” But the good man did not speak harshly to her, nor repulse her. Stern and apparently haughty as he was on some occasions, yet he possessed kind and tender



feelings, as the writer well remembers. He united two qualities that are never found united, except in truly great men, high intellectual power and strong emotional feelings. Without waiting for the little trembling colored girl to say any thing, Dr. Mason said, "Have you come here to talk to me about your soul?" This greatly encouraged her. She went in and disclosed to the venerable<sup>2</sup> man the secrets of her heart.

When Katy was sixteen or seventeen years old, a lady in the city purchased her freedom for \$200, giving her six years to reimburse her; but she afterwards agreed to allow her one half of the sum for eleven months' work, and the late excellent Divie Bethune raised the other hundred dollars.

At eighteen she was married. She had two children, but lost them both. "They are dead," said Katy, "and I have no relations now, and most of my old friends are gone."

During her life, she had taken forty-eight children—twenty of them white children—some from the alms-house and others from their parents, and brought them up, or kept them till she could find places for them. She expended much money on their behalf and followed them with affectionate interest with her prayers. To my inquiry, "Have you laid up any property?" she quickly replied, "How could I, when I gave away all I earned?"

When she lived at 51 Warren street,<sup>3</sup> (the house has since been taken down,) she regularly collected the children in the neighborhood, who were accustomed to run in the street on the Lord's day, into her house, and got suitable persons to come and hear them say their catechism, etc.

The sainted Isabella Graham used to invite Katy's scholars to her house, to say their catechism, and receive religious instruction. This was about the time Dr. Mason's Church in Murray street was built. The doctor heard of her school, and one Sunday visited it. "What are you about here, Katy," said he; "keeping school on the Sabbath? We must not leave you to do all this." So he spoke to his elders, had the lecture-room opened, and the children transferred to it. This was the origin of the Sunday-school in the Murray street church, and it is believed that Katy Ferguson's was the first Sunday-school in the city.

For more than forty years, up to the last of life, she has had a prayer-meeting at her house every Friday evening, and for some five years past another every Sabbath afternoon, into which she gathered the poor neglected children of the neighborhood, and those adults who did not attend church anywhere. She always secured the aid of some good man to conduct these meetings. The results of these efforts were most happy. Tract distributors, city missionaries and others remarked that where Katy lived, the whole aspect of the neighborhood was changed. So much for the exertions of a poor colored woman, who could not read! "The liberal heart deviseth liberal things."

The secret of Katy's usefulness was her fervent, uniform, and consistent piety. No one could be with her, even for a little while, without feeling its influence. The love of God was shed abroad in her heart, and it found expression in acts of benevolence to his children.

The cause of missions was very dear to her. Three years and a half ago a company of missionaries were about to embark for West-Africa, under the direction of the American Missionary Association. One of the missionaries was invited to attend the little meetings held at Katy's house, and did so once or twice before leaving the country. Katy's sympathies were at once strongly enlisted in behalf of this young missionary and all his associates. A few months since, the writer met her in the street, and she eagerly inquired about the Mendi Mission. "For these three years," said she, "I have never missed a day but I have prayed for those dear missionaries."

Katy mourned over the condition of the poor people in the city, who were suffering on account of their vices as well as their poverty. She said: "The ruination of both white and colored people, in this city, is *gambling*. I told one of them, that *I* would never do it; that I had rather live on bread and water."

On Tuesday morning, having been for several days somewhat indisposed, she went out to see a physician. She soon returned to her house and lay down, but grew rapidly worse. In a few hours, it became apparent that her disease was cholera, and she was sensible that the hour of dissolution was at hand. Notwithstanding the suddenness of the summons, she was ready. Her mind was calm and clear. "Oh!" said she to a friend who stood near, "what a good thing it is to have a hope in Jesus!" Her last words were: "All is well." Yes, sainted spirit, "all *is* well."

### Document Notes

1. In the author's previous version of this obituary, in the *New York Daily Tribune*, July 20, 1854, p. 6, he gives Ferguson's age as "about seventy-five." [\[return to text\]](#)

2. In his journal Tappan marked this word with an x and noted in the bottom margin "Dr M. was then rather a young man." [\[return to text\]](#)

3. In the Tribune account the address was given as 52 Warren Street. [\[return to text\]](#)

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African-American Religion: A Documentary History Project  
Amherst College #2269, P. O. Box 5000  
Amherst, MA 01002-5000  
aardoc@amherst.edu*