MAY FIELDING,
THE WHITE SLAVE GIRL

By Elizabeth Baker

In Section P of Mount Hope Cemetery, directly bordering Mount Hope Avenue, lies the rather inconspicuous plot of the Rochester Home for the Friendless. The 1,100-square-foot area is simple with only one monument and three other headstones enclosed by four cornerstones. Despite its barren appearance, this section of the cemetery actually contains the graves of 22 women. All of these women were residents of the Rochester Home for the Friendless and died while in the care of the shelter. This benevolent institution was established in 1849 to provide a temporary home for “friendless, homeless, and virtuous females” in the Rochester area. Oftentimes, Christian burials were provided to those who would otherwise be without. The most notable marker in the yard is a small stone belonging to the young “white slave girl” known as May Fielding. The intriguing inscription on May’s stone and the sad circumstances of the plot itself beg for explanations. As the details of the home and Fielding’s life become unearthed, the plot provides a snapshot into the history of Rochester during the mid 19th century.

In its early years, the Home for the Friendless underwent many changes to become a fully operating shelter in Rochester. When its charter was first written in 1849, the institution was known as the Association for the Relief of Homeless and Friendless Females, with the goal of providing assistance to “virtuous and unprotected women” of all ages as well as children and the sick. First located in half of a tenement house at 33 Edinburgh Street, the home was composed of a female board of managers and a male board of trustees, all of whom were prominent members of Rochester society at the time. While rent at the Edinburgh house was only fifty dollars per year, the location quickly proved too small for the increasing number of residents. The growing organization relocated several times to include brief residences on Monroe Avenue and Adams Street. Developing well beyond its fledgling origins, the association officially changed its name to Rochester Home for the Friendless in 1855, now receiving donations from the community and housing lifetime residents known as “inmates”. By this time the home had acquired its first official property. On February 21, 1854, the first board of managers met at the new building on the northwest corner of East Avenue and Alexander Street. This location was donated by Josiah Bissell whose wife, Julia, was an active member of the society. The association displayed its gratitude for this gift by ensuring thanks “be expressed in all the daily papers of the city, and that Mr. J. W. Bissell be requested to allow a portrait of himself to adorn its walls”. At the time of the move, the home housed twenty-nine inmates, four of them children, and spent $96.61 on expenditures for the month.

With operations fully underway, the Home for the Friendless developed into one of Rochester’s prominent charitable
organizations. In 1857, the society even began to print a monthly newsletter entitled The Journal of the Home. This publication informed people in and around the city of Rochester about the activities of the home. The first issue, printed in September 1857, was under the editorial direction of Mrs. Caroline Mann. A subscription to the journal was fifty cents a year, generating an income directly received by the home. The Journal of the Home included events, such as visitors, new residents, and deaths, as well as stories, poems, local advertisements, and appeals for donations. This publication was also used to find employment for women and adoption homes for orphan children. While most employment opportunities consisted of domestic labor and housekeeping, the home also provided young women with an education. The board of members also established a sewing school and employed a teacher to provide daily lessons.

According to the rules and regulations of the Home for the Friendless circa 1857, an applicant must be a “female of good moral character, destitute of friends, funds, or home” in order to become a resident. The women who founded the association felt that provisions for the poor and weak should be provided regardless of class or origin, claiming that “in a Christian community, provision should be made for those who are in most immediate danger of physical suffering or moral ruin”. Because of this, many immigrants were welcomed into the home while they were looking for work or passing through Rochester. However, there were still some stipulations for entrance. A woman had to be of “good moral character” to be worthy of residence, offering “satisfactory reference” in all cases. Oftentimes, a woman’s virtuousness was determined at the discretion of the matron or board of members, and unwed women with children were commonly turned away from the home in its early years. Once they were inmates, females had to maintain their good character and were required to “accept cheerfully [their] situations”, “be neat and tidy in person”, “rise and retire at the times specified” (9:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. respectively), and “at no time leave the house without permission... until regularly dismissed”. Residents were also expected to attend church every Sunday with the matron.

As this benevolent society evolved through time, the regulations for admittance changed. In 1859, the home altered its constitution to become a permanent residence for aged women while still accepting other residents under special circumstances. The institution changed its name to the Rochester Friendly Home and moved to its present site in Brighton in 1918. In the same year, the home began accepting single men as well as married couples. Now located on a ten-acre site at 3165 East Avenue, the Friendly Home is a non-denominational facility specializing exclusively in care for older adults.

As the benevolent institution accepted more residents in the last few years of their lives, most of the women buried in Section P are elderly, dying from old age or related ailments. Because these women had no relatives and were often quite poor, there are few grave markers in the lot. The monument marking the plot itself is quite plain—the four-sided column reads: BURIAL PLACE OF THE HOME FOR THE FRIENDLESS. Another side holds the following inscription: THOU O GOD HAST PREPARED OF THY GOODNESS FOR THE POOR. This epitaph is taken from Psalm 68:10. The
entire passage reads, "Thy congregation hath dwelt therein: thou, O, God, you have prepared of thy goodness for the poor". This psalm reflects the founders’ moral and religious duty to help the homeless; they felt that by providing Christian hospitality to those less fortunate, they were securing their own reward on the final judgment day, as well as aiding other women to find the glory of Christ.

Despite its simple appearance, this plot is perhaps the most interesting in all of Section P. One stone in particular stands out from the rest. The marker belongs to May Fielding, who was the first resident to die at the Home for the Friendless and at fifteen years old was given a burial plot in Mount Hope Cemetery. Her simple stone reads:

**C.A.M.**
The white slave girl known as
**MAY FIELDING**
 Died June 2, 1857
Aged 15
I was a stranger and ye took me in

This sad stone raises more questions than it answers. Who is this “white slave girl” and what is her story?

The letters C.A.M. at the top of her stone may stand for *Causa amicae memoriae*, which is a variation of a Latin phrase meaning “For the sake of my friend’s memory”. The epitaph on the bottom of the stone comes from Matthew 25:35. The entire verse reads, “I was hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in”. This passage again reflects the morals of the women founding the Home for the Friendless. They felt that by helping those most in need, they were doing the work of Christ, both spreading his goodness and confirming their devotion. “I was a stranger and ye took me in” was also the motto used by *The Journal of the Home* while it was in print from 1857 to 1875.

However, May’s tombstone does not provide any more information on her life or death. Even at the home, little was known about Miss Fielding. Her records simply read “Fielding, Mary, 1857. A sick girl from Clover Street. After bearing her sufferings with great patience fell asleep on the second of June. Her history is shrouded in obscurity. All that is known of her is that she was brought five years since from Washington City to New York, somehow after was taken by Mrs. Pratt and brought to this city and eventually taken by Mrs. Brewster of Clover Street, where she remained until Mrs. Brewster’s death, when she was brought to the Home and professed a hope in Christ and as we hope fell asleep in Jesus. None knew but to pity and love her.”

At the time of her death, May’s past remained a mystery to those at the home. They only knew that she studied at the Clover Street Seminary under the charge of Mrs. C.S. Brewster, who ran the school until her death in October of 1855. The seminary then became the property of Mrs. J.G. Cogswell, who, along with Mrs. George W. Pratt, cared for Miss Fielding until the girl’s sickness required her to enter the Home for the Friendless, where she passed away on June 2, 1857. Some records of the home, refer to the girl as “Mary”, however, the “r” is commonly crossed out with a pencil to signify that her correct name was May. Her previous caretakers, Mrs. Cogswell and Mrs. Pratt, were held accountable for May’s fees during her stay at the home. In 1857, board at the shelter was one dollar per week for adults and fifty cents a week for children. May stayed at the home for four weeks before she died, procuring a bill of about two dollars. Mrs. Cogswell gave compensation through “a liberal donation of vegetables”, but Mrs. Pratt was out of town and could not be contacted.

At first, it seemed that May would only be known at the Home for the Friendless by her sad mysterious tale. But then, about a year after the girl’s death, the home received a note and a ten-dollar donation from Mrs. G. W. Pratt on May 3, 1858. While the donation covered the home’s expenses and funeral costs for May, the letter finally shed light onto her troubled past.
Born in Washington, D.C., May was the daughter of an enslaved “mulatto woman who was in service at a Washington hotel”. Her father was a white “member of the U.S. Congress”. Upon her birth, May was sent to live with her grandmother to avoid scandal, while her mother claimed the child had died. May, who passed for white, remained in the safe care of her grandmother until she reached school age. Once she was attending school and her history and family were likely to become known, Washington, D.C., in pre-Civil-War days where the Fugitive Slave Law was enforced, was thought to be too dangerous for the girl. At the age of 10 years, May moved to Rochester for safety with the help of Mrs. Pratt. The child then enrolled in the Clover Street Seminary with the help of Mrs. Brewster who became her charge and “only friend”. It was here, in Rochester, that she was given the name “May Fielding”, perhaps to protect her identity or perhaps because her original name was a mystery. Regardless, Miss

Fielding remained in Rochester for five years at the Clover Street Seminary before contracting tuberculosis and “as an orphan sick and friendless, became an inmate of the Home for the Friendless”. After struggling with her illness at the shelter for four weeks, May passed away from consumption on June 2, 1857.

This tale is filled with sadness, scandal, and the repression of the times. Although she was only a quarter African-American, May’s life was filled with intolerance and injustice. The home printed her story in the June 1858 issue of The Journal where the author wrote, “While the voice of her father was echoing in the legislative halls of the ‘land of the free’, this child of his came wailing into bondage, born into a heritage of servitude”. The article is also quick to mention that May was “a daughter of that race who wears the shadowed livery of the burnished sun, [but] her skin, not that of a brunette but that of a blonde, claimed sisterhood with the fairest of our Saxon daughters”.

Because May was a fair-skinned daughter of slavery, her tombstone reads “white slave girl”. May’s history is terrifying, lonely, and sad, but the women at the Home for the Friendless were able to provide her with compassion and care in the short time before her death. The women of the home were also able to immortalize May Fielding in Mount Hope Cemetery, so the struggles of her short life can be remembered forever.

May Fielding is only part of the memorialized history of the Home for the Friendless in Mount Hope Cemetery. As the institution continued to grow through the years, the home quickly ran out of space for graves in Section P. On May 8, 1789, the home acquired land in Section Y, Lot 3 of Mount Hope Cemetery. This 50’ x 24’ site was given to the home by the cemetery commissioners, and a monument was erected through donations. Today, only the pedestal of this monument remains.
Peter Pitkin donated the four cornerstones that presently enclose the home’s original plot in Section P. In 1909, the home expanded further, purchasing a 24’ x 32’ area in Section BB, Lot 36, of Mount Hope for $320. More plots were purchased in Section BB in 1929.

The Rochester Friendly Home presently owns an additional eight lots, all in Range 9, which were purchased in 1963. The newer plots in Section Y, Section BB, and Range 9 look very different from the original resting place for the home’s residents in Section P. Each individual is now given a headstone, and these small, uniform markers are aligned in neat rows. While the plot monument in Section Y is missing, the large granite stone marking the plot in Range 9 simply reads “Rochester Friendly Home”. Gone are the religious theme of immortality and in its place is a greater sense of community for remembrance. Now that the Friendly Home is non-denominational, the past residents of the home are memorialized as a coherent group not based on religion but friendship.

(Editor’s Note: The author is a University of Rochester student and prepared this article as part of course work for Religion 167K, which is taught by Professor Emil Homerin, who is also a trustee of the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery. Our congratulations and thanks go to author Elizabeth Baker for her outstanding research that revealed the story behind the mysterious tombstone of May Fielding.)

JOURNEY TO JAPAN: WILLIAM BEMIS DRAPER AND THE TELEGRAPH

By Sara Cohen

The Draper family plot in Mount Hope Cemetery, Section R, Lot 24, is a row of tilted gravestones of varying styles and a flat-topped obelisk, all worn down by acid rain. Yet, among them lies the grave of William Bemis Draper, who led a short but prestigious life. An obituary written about him suggests that sharing science was viewed as a remarkable and important achievement in the nineteenth century. The obituary states that Draper accompanied Commodore Matthew Perry on his Japanese expedition and “erected a line and operated an instrument on the shores of that distant empire”. Draper was only 24 years old in 1854, and it was Commodore Perry’s second expedition to Japan. In the rush of global imperialism of that time, Perry’s goal was to sign a treaty between Japan and the United States that would end Japan’s traditional policy of isolation.

In order to secure the treaty, Perry brought a number of gifts to offer the Japanese. Historian Simon Partner explains, “The largest items put on display for the assembled Japanese officials were a miniature steam engine with a circular track and a late-model
electric telegraph machine inscribed “To the Emperor of Japan”.

The expedition’s official narrative glows with American patriotism as it heralds the demonstration a great success. It reads: “Posts were brought and erected for the extension of the telegraph wires, the Japanese taking a very ready part in all the labors, and watching the result of arranging and putting together of machinery with an innocent and childlike delight. The telegraphic apparatus, under the direction of Messrs. Draper and Williams, was soon in working order, the wires extending for nearly a mile in a direct line, one end being at the treaty house and another at a building expressly allotted for the purpose. When communication was opened up for the operators at either extremity, the Japanese watched with intense curiosity the modus operandi, and were greatly amazed to find that in an instant messages were conveyed in the English, Dutch, and Japanese languages from building to building. Day after day the dignitaries and many of the people would gather, and, eagerly beseeching the operators to work the telegraph, would watch with unabated interest the sending and receiving of messages.”

An 1855 article in the Rochester Daily Union offers a similarly positive report that focuses on the special advantages of Draper’s position in the expedition: “Wm. B. Draper...went out with the squadron to exhibit the magnetic telegraph to the emperor of Japan, was absent two years and a half, and returned in the store ship Lexington. Mr. D. gives an interesting account of what he saw, and few had a better opportunity than he to see the people and learn their manners and customs. He was on shore more than any man of the squadron, having constructed two miles of telegraph and operated the same for the amusement and instruction of the emperor. Some of the princes of the empire were students.”

Today, Commodore Perry’s expedition to Japan is seen in a more critical light. Simon Partner, author of Assembled in Japan: Electrical Goods and the Making of the Japanese
Japanese artists created this print to illustrate Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan in 1854.

Consumer, calls the gifts offered “both a promise and a threat,” intended to scare the Japanese into agreement. According to Partner, the speed of telegraph communication symbolized the rapidity with which America could employ its superior weaponry, also demonstrated at the treaty negotiation, to hurt or help the Japanese. All the while the American troops viewed the Japanese people with contempt, “making little distinction between the Japanese and a tribe of island savages”. This negative attitude is even reflected in the newspaper article describing William Draper’s journey to Japan. The article describes a series of Japanese paintings that Draper received in Japan. The author calls the paintings “sketches” and bluntly questions their aesthetic value. He writes, “They do not evidence great artistic skill, yet they do give us a good idea of the scenery of Japan”.

The article ends with the news that Draper intended to return to Japan in the fall in order to construct a network of telegraph lines in the country, “at the request of the emperor”. It is unclear whether Draper had the chance to journey back to Japan, but two years later on March 7, 1857 the Union and Advertiser reported Draper ill with paralysis. The article suggested his excruciating condition was partially the result of medical negligence. They reported: “A gentleman who has just returned from the Capital states that Mr. D was attacked in the evening of the third instant, and was not properly attended by medical men until the following morning, when he was nearly speechless.” Less than a month later, he died in Washington, D.C. He was only 27 years old.

(Editor’s Note: The author, Sara Cohen, is a student at the University of Rochester and prepared this article as part of course requirements for Religion 167, which is taught by Professor Emil Homerin, who is also a trustee of the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery. It is interesting that Commodore Matthew Perry’s expeditions to Japan from 1852 to 1854 were ordered by U.S. President Millard Fillmore, a native of Buffalo. These expeditions, intended to force Japan to open diplomatic negotiations with the United States and grant the first trading rights to the U.S., were dramatized by Stephen Sondheim, including a critical song about President Fillmore, in his Broadway musical, “Pacific Overtures”, originally staged in 1976.)
WINTER TOURS OFFER BRISK WALKS IN CLEAN AIR, FASCINATING SIGHTS, AND INTERESTING STORIES

By Richard Reisem

Our winter tours of Mount Hope Cemetery are designed to cover captivating sites with engrossing anecdotes along plowed roads with almost no vehicular traffic. These tours are a convenient way to get mild exercise, breathe clean air, enjoy great winter scenery, and hear entertaining stories from Rochester’s past. Your tour guide is the champion storyteller, Don Hall. To avoid sliding on slippery slopes like those in the areas of most of our summer tours, these winter walks are held in the large flat area of southern Mount Hope Cemetery near Elmwood Avenue. It is an area that covers most of the cemetery’s grand mausoleums, the expensive monuments of many of Rochester’s most wealthy, and much of the cemetery’s most unusual sculptures. If you haven’t explored this vast area of the cemetery, you will find it revelatory. And the walk is definitely invigorating.

You have already missed the first winter tour, which occurred on January 29. And unless this newsletter is distributed early enough, you may well miss the second tour, on February 12. This announcement, however, should reach you well in advance of the tour planned for Saturday, March 19 at 1:00 p.m. Meet inside the gates at the south entrance on Mount Hope Avenue, opposite the Distillery bar and restaurant. There is ample parking alongside the cemetery’s roads.