MY STORY ABOUT MOTHER JONES BEGAN twenty years ago when I read chapter seven of folklorist Archie Green's *Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs*. While discussing the last years of her life and the creation of the song "The Death of Mother Jones," Green mentioned that she passed away in Hyattsville, Maryland. Since I had grown up and attended high school in nearby Silver Spring, Maryland, and still lived in the area, the prospect of finding out more about the exact location of her last home intrigued me.

Throughout her lifetime, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones was the most loved and newsworthy woman in the labor movement. She never held elective union office, but for almost sixty years she served as an organizer and a labor agitator. At various times the rich and powerful denounced her as "the Most Dangerous Woman in America." More often, the workers of America exalted her as "the Miners' Angel," "the Joan of Arc of the Labor Movement," and "the Grand Old Champion of Labor."

She was born in Cork, Ireland, and claimed May 1, 1830 as her birth date. Within a few years, her grandfather died on the gallows as punishment for fighting for Irish independence from Britain, and his son, Mary's father, fled to the United States. In 1838, young Mary Harris immigrated to Canada with her mother and two siblings, where the family reunited with John Harris who had moved there to work as a railroad construction laborer. As a young adult she became a teacher in the Toronto public schools and later learned dressmaking after she had moved to the United States. In 1861, while living in Memphis, Tennessee, she met and married George Jones, an iron molder and union activist. Tragedy occurred six years later when a yellow fever epidemic claimed the lives of her husband and four children. Jones later recalled, "I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me. No one could. Other homes were as stricken as mine."

Mary Jones sought a new life in Chicago, where she opened a dressmaking establishment. Before long, the Chicago fire of 1871 destroyed most of the city, including her shop and all her possessions. Destitute, she survived by using her seamstress skills. Jones' life revived when she began to attend meetings in the fire-damaged Knights of Labor hall in her community. There she found fraternity and purpose and later met and became friends with Terence V. Powderly, who by 1879 headed the labor organization.

Jones embarked on a fifty-year-and-beyond journey for the labor movement. Fleeing a permanent home, she never lacked shelter. As she traveled around the country from one labor upheaval to another, workers opened their homes to her. Other times she stayed in modest...
hotels, union halls, and even miners' tent colonies. Often, her handbag served as her pillow. When asked where she lived, Jones once replied that her address was like her shoes—it traveled with her. Her family was the American working class.

Serving as a paid union organizer or as a free-lance agitator from the 1870s to the 1920s, Jones participated in most of the great labor events of those years: the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad strike, 1877; Chicago's Haymarket tragedy, 1886; the Pullman strike, 1894; the Pennsylvania anthracite strike, 1902; the Chicago founding convention of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), 1905; the massacre at Ludlow, Colorado, 1914; and the nationwide steel strike, 1919.

If Mary Jones did have a home base, it was the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Although throughout her long life she aided child textile workers, railway carmen, steel workers, metal workers, and others, the miners first and foremost were "her boys." They in turn responded by calling her "Mother," a term of endearment that friends and foes adopted when referring to her.

Mother Jones often said, "I'm not a humanitarian. I'm a hell-raiser." "She specialized in violating injunctions and going to jail in support of workers. In one jail cell she had to fight off the rats with a broken bottle. "Good practice," she said, "because when I get out of here I'm going to fight the rats on the outside." Her motto was "pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living."

As age diminished her energy, she often visited the Washington, D.C. home of her friend of forty years, Terence Powderly, in order to rest and recuperate. After his death in 1924, Mother Jones continued her nomadic life, staying in San Francisco with Katherine Schmidt, in Los Angeles with Margaret Flaherty, in Chicago with Ed Nockels, and in Washington D.C. with Powderly's widow, Emma Powderly.

Walter and Lillie May Burgess, who lived in rural Maryland on an isolated truck farm six miles north of the Washington, D.C. city line, had known the Powderlys for many years and probably sold them produce from the farm. The Burgess met Mother Jones at the Powderlys' home and Lillie May Burgess often drove Mother Jones to their farm for a day's outing, an overnight stay, or a week-long visit. In the spring of 1927, Mother Jones expressed the desire to remain permanently at the farm. Although she stayed until January of the following year, the threat of heavy snow blocking roads, no telephone at the farm, and the nearest physician miles away convinced the Burgess that Mother Jones should return to the District where prompt medical help would be available. During return visits to the farm in 1928, Mother Jones continued to insist that she wanted to stay with the Burgess and, toward the end of the year, she arrived.
*Powder Mill Road now extends to New Hampshire Avenue, replacing Franklin Ave
unannounced with all her belongings to spend the rest of her life there. As Lillie May Burgess later remarked about the welcome arrival, when Mother Jones "made up her mind to do a thing, she almost invariably did it."

During her final two years, Mother Jones led a remarkably active life. Among the numerous visitors to the farm were many long-time labor friends such as Ed Nockels, secretary of the Chicago Federation of Labor, and William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor. Politicians such as Idaho Senator William Borah and former North Dakota Congressman John Buer (who had become a cartoonist for Labor, the newspaper of the railway brotherhoods) also came out to confer with the remarkable woman whose opinions they valued. The outpouring of affection reached a peak on May 1, 1930, when over one thousand people joined Mother Jones at the farm to celebrate her one hundredth birthday.

As Mother Jones' health declined in the months after the party, Lillie May Burgess became exhausted by the strain of care giving. Interest in Mother Jones was so great that in October the press reported the hospitalization of Mrs. Burgess with a serious illness. As Lillie May began regaining her strength after leaving the hospital, Mother Jones' ebbed away. At 11:55 P.M. on November 30, 1930, Mother Jones died at the farm she loved and called home.

My search for the Burgess home began in the late 1970s with Archie Green's book and the University of
Maryland's library, where I worked at the time. The library could not provide me with the specific information I was seeking, so I decided to check documents in the office of the recorder of deeds located in nearby Upper Marlboro, Maryland. I found some information but was unable to decipher the surveyor's maps and I did not have my own map of the area to help me out. I took a day off from work to visit the archives at The Catholic University of America, which held the papers of Mother Jones and of Terence Powderly. I researched for a while without success. Then, just before the archives was to close, my eye caught sight of one of the newspaper clippings pasted in a scrapbook created by Emma Powderly. The item was the Washington Star's account of the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary celebration of Walter and Lillian Burgess held at their home. Listed as attending were a Mr. and Mrs. F. W. Fowler of Takoma Park, Maryland.

Since I lived in Takoma Park, I decided to contact all the Fowlers listed in the local telephone directory. After several negative replies to my question, "Does the name Mother Jones mean anything to you?" I reached someone who said, "I haven't heard that name mentioned in years. You must talk with Burt Fowler." You can't imagine my excitement when, over the phone, Mr. Fowler told me that he was Lillie May Burgess' nephew and that he had helped park cars at the many guests who attended Mother Jones' one hundredth birthday celebration at the house. He also stated, "I have a document in my house from my aunt Lillian Burgess that might interest you."

At the time, I was taking an evening course at the University of Maryland on the history of American coal miners, so I brought along my professor, David Corbin, to see the manuscript. It turned out that Mrs. Burgess had written an account of her caring for Mother Jones. Corbin said the account contained a great deal of worthwhile historical information and needed to be preserved. He suggested I contact the archivist at West Virginia University and I soon found myself assisting Fowler in consigning the manuscript to the library's special collections department. Scholars and labor history fans now had access to further information about Mother Jones' last years. Although I had done my duty to the memory of Mother Jones and her benefactor, I still did not know the exact location of the Burgess house which no longer existed.
Mother Jones' funeral at St. Gabriel's Roman Catholic Church, December 3, 1950. Her close friend, the Reverend William Sweaney, assistant pastor of the church, conducted the service. The pallbearers were "her boys" from union locals in the Washington, D.C. area: the International Typographical Union; the International Plate Printers', Die Stampers' and Engravers' Union of North America; the International Brotherhood of Firemen and Oilers; the International Association of Machinists; the United Association of Journeymen Plumbers and Steamfitters of the United States and Canada; and the Stenographers, Bookkeepers and Assistants, a directly affiliated union of the AFL. Forty-four union officials, including AFL President William Green, served as honorary pallbearers.

I left the University of Maryland and eventually began working at the Library of Congress. Twenty years later I was in a bookstore and came across a book describing Maryland historical markers. Of the 400 items listed, not one celebrated unions or the workers of Maryland. I immediately thought that the Burgess house should be the first of many labor sites in Maryland that needed to be honored.

I renewed my original quest with great zeal. In the intervening years, Burt Fowler had died, but I was able to trace the whereabouts of his widow who had moved out of the state. My previous contact with the Fowlers had been at their house on Riggs Road, but in all my conversations with Burt, I never inquired about the exact location of his aunt's farm. The once rural area had changed so much since the 1930s that it had become a typical suburban middle-class neighborhood. Upon reaching Mrs. Fowler, she suggested that for more information I contact the Baptist church located near her former home. During my research in the late 1970s, I had found out that Lillie May Burgess' husband had died in 1932, two years after Mother Jones. No longer able to run the farm by herself, Mrs. Burgess turned the property into the Mother Jones Rest Home, which she ran successfully for fourteen or more years. If I could link the convalescent home to the current church property, I would have my answer after twenty years.

Hillandale Baptist Church records provided the necessary document. In its archives were documents recording the sale of five acres of Burgess' property to the church in 1952. The church's pastor also mentioned to me that several of the long-time church members recalled "an old nursing home" on the property in the early 1950s. More recently, removal of trees from the church
Above: Burgess house, 1954. The picture also shows a garage-type building behind the house and the roof of the newly built Hillendale Baptist Church. The dwelling's porch area had been extensively renovated in the twenty-four years since Mother Jones resided there. Photograph by Rebecca Lockstampsfor Smith.

Foundation stones unearthed recently by the Hillendale Baptist Church. These are the remaining fragments of what is presumed to be the Walter and Lillie May Burgess home where Mother Jones died.

Saul Schneiderman stands next to the Maryland roadside marker which will be dedicated on December 2, 2000, two days after the seventieth anniversary of Mother Jones' death at the Burgess home. Photograph by Bob Reynolds.

tacted the Metropolitan Washington Council AFL-CIO, the Maryland State and D.C. AFL-CIO, the National Capital Area Union Retirees, the National Labor College-George Meany Center for Labor Studies, and Cecil Roberts, the president of the United Mine Workers of America. All responded with enthusiastic letters of support. The Historical Trust agreed to provide the roadside marker. The unveiling ceremony will occur on the weekend following November 30, 2000—the seventieth anniversary of Mother Jones’ death. Unionists and community residents will gather to honor Mother Jones and the Burgesses. The historical marker will read: Mother Jones “Grand Old Champion of Labor.” Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, the legendary labor organizer, spent a lifetime fighting for unions and the rights of workers. She died at the Burgess Farm near here on November 30, 1930, aged 100 years.

My journey of twenty years of research and discovery has ended in success. The lessons learned that I pass on to others are several. Don’t be victimized by the tyranny of the present. Stop, look, and listen. There is labor history in your town, in your neighborhood, in your family, in your workplace. Dig where you stand and you will find it.
NOTES

Saul Schniderman is a cataloger in the Copyright Office of the Library of Congress. He is president of the Library of Congress Professional Guild. Local 2910, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. He is the secretary-treasurer of the Labor Heritage Foundation and, from 1981-1988, he edited Talkin’ Union, a magazine of labor folklore, music, and history.

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A damaged photograph of Lillie May Burgess and the sign announcing the rest home that perpetuated the legacy of Mother Jones at the site, ca. 1952. The picture of Mother Jones on the sign is based on a 1924 drawing created by her close friend John Baer, a cartoonist for Labor, the newspaper of the railroad brotherhoods.


CHARLES S. ADAMS, editor and compiler, ROADSIDE MARKERS IN MARYLAND (Shepherdstown, West Virginia: Charles S. Adams, 1997).


John Baer’s drawing of Mother Jones, for which she posed in 1924.