



**Margaret Collins:
A Realtor Committed to Fair Housing**

Realty Firm in Ardmore Draws No Color Line



Margaret Collins, pictured with Friends Suburban Housing's first customers—retired teachers and sisters, Clayda and Lucile Williams.

Margaret Hill Collins, a real estate agent, Quaker, and native of Bryn Mawr, was a passionate, lifelong advocate for fair and integrated housing in the Philadelphia region. The daughter of a Philadelphia paper manufacturer, Collins was born in 1908 and was educated at Sarah Lawrence College, the University of California at Berkeley, and Bryn Mawr College, where she earned a Master's degree in social work.

Collins, who was white, became interested in race relations through a close friendship with Mazie Hall, an African American educator and civil rights advocate. In the early 1950s, Collins and Hall co-organized Quaker sponsored "Fellowship Weekends" where African American families from the city were invited to spend time with white families in the suburbs. At the first Fellowship Weekend, one participant remarked that if housing segregation didn't exist, no such program for increasing contact between races would be necessary. Over the next year or two, this comment remained in Collins' mind and she concluded that the Fellowship Weekends were an inadequate response to the problem of segregation.

Collins earned her real estate broker's license and in 1956, five years before the passage of the Pennsylvania Fair Housing Act in 1961 and 12 years before the passage of the federal Fair Housing Act, she founded a nondiscriminatory real estate firm called Friends Suburban Housing with the mission of selling homes without regard to color.

Margaret Collins faced immense challenges in her endeavor to promote freedom in housing. She initially found it very difficult to secure mortgage loans and homeowners insurance policies for her clients and had vastly underestimated the time and effort that would be involved in finding listings from owners willing to sell to Black families, as even sympathetic sellers feared reprisals from neighbors. It became necessary to fundraise to support the work of the company, with Collins often volunteering her time.

Even more challenging was the violence and property damage that resulted from a number of Collins' sales to Black families in all white neighborhoods, and the failure of local governments to take action against this violence. One such incident took place in Rutledge, Delaware County in 1958. The night before the family that had bought a home moved in, the house was destroyed by a suspected arson fire which the fire department did not respond to until it was too late to save the home. The municipality denied the family a building permit to rebuild and it was necessary to take the matter to court before they were permitted to rebuild. In Wayne the same year, neighbors flooded the basement of a home sold by Friends Suburban Housing.

In 1963, a three-day riot raged when a Black family moved into a home sold by Collins in Folcroft. The family and supporters were driven back twice by a mob when they tried to move in. A group of pastors formed a human shield to protect

the family and stay with them. Unrestrained by the local police, crowds of residents bombarded the house with rocks and other projectiles causing extensive property damage. Rioters shattered every window in the home, bashed in doors, damaged kitchen cabinets, ripped out electrical and plumbing fixtures, tore the chrome off their car and broke the car windows, and yelled racial slurs. A Molotov cocktail was thrown into the second floor, starting a small fire. The family spent a night huddled in the basement until supporters convinced the Pennsylvania State Police to intervene.

More common than outright violence were organized protests and petitions opposing the entry of Black families into local neighborhoods. Collins often showed houses in all white neighborhoods to African American families at night, to avoid harassment from neighbors. Members of the Southeast Delaware County Committee of Friends Suburban Housing, the group that would eventually become the Housing Equality Center, would take turns staying with families at their homes in the days after they moved in when there was neighborhood opposition or threats of violence.

Collins attempted to join the Main Line Board of Realtors three times during the 1960s in order to access a comprehensive list of properties for sale in the area, but was rejected each time. In 1968, convinced that the rejection was based on the color of her clients, she sued the board for illegal restraint of trade for denying Friends Suburban Housing the use of its valuable multiple listing service. Collins finally won her case in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 1973.

Over the 20 years of the company's existence, Friends Suburban Housing sold 232 homes to Black buyers in 60 previously all white communities, beginning the racial integration of the Philadelphia suburbs. Although Margaret Collins was highly regarded as a pioneer in advocating for fair housing in the region, she never regarded herself as such, stating that, "I wasn't any pioneer—the black person was the pioneer." Collins, reporting on one success story, told of a buyer in Media in 1960 that said to her, "The most remarkable thing happened the other day. I was cutting the lawn when a neighbor came by and shook my hand and said, 'I had been saying the most awful things about you before you moved in. But I see now that I was wrong. I am glad that you moved into our neighborhood.'"

By 1975 fair housing laws had begun to be enforced more effectively, creating more opportunities for non-white families to buy homes through the conventional real estate market, and Friends Suburban Housing dissolved. Margaret Collins went on to acquire and renovate abandoned housing, hiring Black contractors to repair the homes, then structuring affordable rent to own arrangements with families who had previously encountered difficulties in attempting to purchase a home. A tireless advocate for racial equality and fair housing, she continued her involvement with a number of other local organizations working on these issues until her death in 2006.