

**Marjorie Abbott Akins**  
**October 22, 1927 - March 31, 2014**



Marjorie “Marney” Abbott was born in Brooklyn, NY and grew up in Warwick, New York. Her father was an attorney, and in this household communication was key. Her sister, smiling, said, “In our house, we heard, ‘If you don’t have something to say, don’t waste words proving it to everyone.’”

She graduated from Rockford College (now University) in Rockford, IL in 1948. Marney noted that pioneer social worker Jane Addams was one of its first graduates. She greatly respected both Addams’ idealism and her pragmatism. Marney then went on to earn a Masters degree in Russian Studies at Harvard.

In the summer of 1950, Marney worked with an American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) work camp in Finland and Germany. For two more years she worked with the World Council of Churches in Europe in refugee settlements. On an ocean journey home in 1952 she met James Akins.

Marney then worked at AFSC’s International Student House (ISH), located near and supported by Friends Meeting of Washington (FMW), as Jim awaited a Foreign Service posting. Marney carried fond memories of ISH, founded by Quakers in 1936. Refusing to despair at either world events or local racial segregation, they had sought to make a contribution to peace and a better understanding among young adults of diverse national backgrounds. Now independent, it has succeeded to this day.

Marney and Jim married in Warwick, NY on May 22, 1954. She was now a Foreign Service wife, a position that Washingtonians knew meant an often unacknowledged, and even more often underappreciated, role in the process of diplomacy. In the next two years the Foreign Service took the Akins to Rome, Paris and Strasbourg. Marney arranged for moving and for regularly entertaining guests, understanding that entertaining was the lifeblood of informal diplomacy. One had to be a quick study on food, culture, politics, certainly, but these needed to be underpinned with an awareness of religion, economics and social issues, always knit together by the common humanity of the individuals at the table and respect for the peoples whom they represented. Shared understandings and strong relationships would build toward peace.

This life was not all about conversations, however. In 1956 the Suez conflict reverberated internationally, and Jim was called to Syria. Marney was not allowed to go for a year. They then served in Lebanon, followed by Kuwait, when son Tom was adopted, and then in Baghdad, Iraq, when daughter Mary Beth was adopted. In Iraq they endured the violence of a government takeover, sheltering in the inner rooms of their home.

1965 brought them back to Washington for several years. The family joined Friends Meeting of Washington in March of 1966 by transferring from the Meeting at Brummana Friends School in Lebanon. Also transferred to the United States was a remarkable collection of archaeological pieces discovered on weekend expeditions into the desert while in Iraq. This passion for archaeology stayed with them always. For Marney, who volunteered to work on pieces like these at the Smithsonian Institution, they were far from just shards – they had lessons, contexts, and meaning for us today. Said one Friend, “She really was a teacher.”

While in Washington, Marney and Jim entertained many guests, and attended cultural events regularly. However, Friends knew Marney for her service on the Religious Education Committee for six years, including serving as its Clerk. The FMW history notes that in 1968 there were “120 pupils with 29 teachers and aides.” Marney quietly recalled aloud having to rent classroom space near the Meeting House, but the work went far beyond that. Friends may recall that this was still a time when sharp distinctions were made: men had “professions” and women had “activities.” Some of these “activities” provided the backbone of support to then-larger Quaker Meetings.

A note to the Meeting dated September 6, 1973, simply says, “We expect to be moving to Saudi Arabia in early October, so I must regretfully resign from the Overseers Committee.” Jim had been appointed as the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. He held this post until February, 1976. During this time, one of the many guests Marney hosted was Patricia Nixon, wife of the United States President, in 1974. Within a year, both Quaker husbands would be removed from their positions amidst very different controversies. In Jim’s case, it was a difference with his boss, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was suggesting U.S. dominance over Mideast oil production by use of force, if needed.

From 1976 on, the Akins were based in Washington, with Jim no longer part of the Foreign Service, but instead a consultant for corporations. Marney was now freer from “wife of” duties, but she continued to extend hospitality to friends from all over the world. Cultural events were a vital part of the couple’s lives. Grandchildren were much beloved. Marney and Jim still traveled.

Friends were the beneficiaries of much of this newly-available time. At FMW she served on Overseers and Nominating Committees, as Recording Clerk, and was a regular volunteer at the Meeting House. She performed historian's duties, including preparing materials to be sent to the Swarthmore archives. She served on and helped manage the process for the Yearly Meeting history project for the 1993-2003 volumes. She worked to make Quakerism visible locally in organizations such as the District of Columbia Historical Society, providing Quaker historical content for some exhibits.

About her role as a Recording Clerk, a former FMW Presiding Clerk recalled: ". . . that period of shared service remains one of the highlights of my time at Friends Meeting of Washington. Marney was steeped in an understanding of and appreciation of process and 'right order.' I have rarely worked with any person who understood the importance of precision and clarity in preventing misunderstandings arising at some future date. Marney had a practice of pre-writing minutes of sections of a Meeting for Business where she believed that the action proposed was uncontroversial or routine. Yet she was willing to drop even the most elegantly expressed pre-written minute when she realized that what had occurred was no longer accurately reflected in her original words. Marney's minutes exhibit the art of the Quaker minute. Spare in expression, nothing important was omitted and the views of Friends struggling with a controversial issue were captured with an open heart and attention to the inner music that explains so much of how Friends conduct their affairs. When planning for Meeting for Business, Marney had a valuable instinct about the ordering, timing and phrasing of issues. Unknown to most Friends, the fact that Meetings for Business managed to cover enormous ground and yet were sufficiently open to permit time and space when needed, owed a great debt to her feelings for the rhythm that went into a well-run meeting."

"Beyond her key role as an exemplary Recording Clerk," a Friend recalls, "Marney was a virtual welcoming committee for Friends Meeting of Washington . . . A newcomer would stand to introduce himself or herself following the rise of Meeting, and you could count on the fact that Marney would home in on the visitor, talking about where they came from, people they might know who had an FMW connection, and demonstrating an inclusive delight in new people. Dozens of Friends recall their first introduction to Friends Meeting of Washington came when Marney would come talk to them and they would find themselves invited to come to her home that very day for lunch and to get better acquainted."

Marney is fondly remembered for her attendance at Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) Interim Meeting Days and Annual Session in August each year. Through a period of 15 years or more in the 1980s and 1990s, Marney served on the Education Funding Resources Committee, as BYM Recording Clerk, and on the BYM Records and Handbook Committee, including four years as Clerk of the Committee.

In the early 2000s, Marney and Jim moved to the Collington retirement community, some distance from the Meeting. Marney regularly attended a Friends worship group there. Jim died July 15, 2010. After Jim's death, Marney's stamina was not the same as before.

Missing from present memories are Marney's recollections of the Foreign Service during the McCarthy era, or living through the 1968 riots in Washington, or how the long, wounding years of the Viet Nam War affected FMW. In quiet conversation, after her service as a diplomatic wife, it could be almost unsettling to hear how calmly Marney could think the unthinkable. Faced with

a difficult situation, this warm, gracious Friend would step back and calmly look ahead with strong compassion, without much sentimentality, and start evaluating the possible opportunities at hand. One Friend recently noted Marney's frequent gift at Memorial Meetings: As Friends recalled all that had been offered in the life now past, Marney would stand and say, "Who will take up the work that this Friend has laid down?"