



Prologue: Urban Oasis

[2000]

ON A PERFECT weekday evening in July, my husband and I sit in an outdoor dining alcove at a steakhouse in the Rittenhouse Hotel. The waning sun throws long slants of golden light into the treetops and along the facades facing west. Across the street on the west edge of Rittenhouse Square, couples stroll along the broad sidewalk, the better to see and be seen. Other strollers, their backs to us, lean against the iron fence surrounding the Square.

Inside the Square itself, families and groups of friends spread picnic blankets. The earliest arrivals sit on folding chairs in front of a portable outdoor stage. They are young, old, black, white, Latino, Asian. Some push baby strollers; others lean on walkers and canes.

All of us await a concert to be presented by students from the Academy of Vocal Arts, located just two blocks away. It is all part of Philadelphia's Welcome America Festival, held annually in recent years during Fourth of July week. This music, as much as our dinner, is what has drawn us to this alcove on the Square.

Within a few minutes the orchestra tunes up, and the young singers' voices float across the Square and beyond, rising above the noises of the crowd and the city. My husband and I wonder who the soprano is and try to guess what she is singing. A diner at the next table, overhearing us, offers us a program. He and his wife, he explains, are tourists from Santa Barbara, California. They spent the day visiting the ships and museums along Penn's Landing before meandering westward across Philadelphia's downtown Center City district. They happened upon this concert and this restaurant entirely by chance.

"What is this place?" they ask. We point out that the walk they have just taken replicates Philadelphia's westward expansion from the Delaware River waterfront in 1682 to this area in the 1850s. In a matter of two hours they have traversed nearly two centuries' worth of human endeavor, and the haven where they sit now represents the efforts of still another century and a half.

Of course, these tourists from California could make a similar journey in many other cities as well, but this gentle oasis in the heart of a bustling city is not so easily replicated. The passage of time alone cannot explain its creation or its survival. This place is unique, and so is the combination of human events and relationships that created and sustained it.

