

The Society of Friends: Research in Quaker Records

Class 2: Quaker Records

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The Society of Friends kept many records that offer valuable vital record information and even paths of migration for our Quaker ancestors.

Finding a Meeting

Before a family historian can use the records created by the Society of Friends, it is first important to locate the correct meeting. As such, it is important to know where a family is residing. Depending on the family in question, this may require the use of census records, land records, or probate to get a better sense of where a family was residing at any given time.

When working with families in large cities such as Philadelphia, it is important to understand that there will be more than a single Monthly Meeting in a city of that size—especially considering the history of the Quakers in Pennsylvania in general.

You may find that a compiled finding aid or volume has been created to assist you in not only identifying the monthly meeting your ancestors attended, but also when that meeting was begun, and out of which meeting it came.

An example of such a compiled volume is Richard D. Stattler's *Guide to the Records of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in New England*. Stattler compiled this volume in 1997 and at that time he was the archivist for the New England Yearly Meeting. A PDF version of this compilation is now available online (see Bibliography at the end).

A similar volume, though it encompasses all North America, is Thomas C. Hill's *Monthly Meetings in North America, A Quaker Index*. The fourth edition of this volume was published in 1998. Unlike Stattler's New England volume, there is no PDF version of Hill's 466-page tome. Instead of putting a PDF version of his work online, Hill's work has become an interactive, searchable database known as QuakerMeetings.com. Through this database you can search by meeting name, county, and/or state.

Tip: When searching for meetings on QuakerMeetings.com, you will find many of them identified by their affiliation after the various schisms.

Another resource that may assist in identifying available meeting records is the Catalog at FamilySearch.org. Through their *place search* for towns and counties, you can see what records they were able to microfilm (and thus now digitize). Unfortunately, the agreements with various repositories of the Quaker records has required FamilySearch.org to limit access, which requires researchers to view the

images at a local Family History Center (found in some local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' churches) or at a FamilySearch affiliate institution. The affiliate institutions may be local public libraries or repositories such as American Ancestors and New England Historic Genealogical Society.

Finally, many of the Quaker colleges with Quaker records have been working in partnership with Ancestry.com to digitize their holdings.

Quaker Records

The Society of Friends have always made a point of recording important information about their members. From the publications of the “sufferings” (those who were fined, incarcerated, banished from their home country, or in some cases executed) to the business of the various regional meetings coupled with the ongoing communication from the various Yearly Meetings to the smaller meetings, there are a lot of records and many of them offer information about those individuals who called themselves Friends.

Some of the best records for genealogical information include:

- Meeting Minutes
- Marriage Records
- Registers of Births, Deaths, Removals, and Disownments
- Miscellaneous Volumes

Meeting Minutes

The meeting minutes are often overlooked in large part due to their lack of indexing. Prior to circa 1900, men and women held separate meetings and as a result there are Men's Minutes and Women's Minutes. Because unity is important within the Society of Friends, issues brought up in the Women's meeting about a female will be brought to the attention of the Men's meeting. In some instances, the information you seek about the issue may be recorded in greater detail within the meeting of the opposite gender.

Of the various meetings (Yearly, Quarterly, Monthly, Preparative), the Monthly Meeting minutes are usually the best resource when trying to understand the interaction among members of a particular Monthly Meeting, as well as discovering a variety of discipline issues that may have arisen among the group. These can include:

- Appointments of:
 - Elders
 - Clerks
 - Overseers
- Appointments of individuals to other meetings (Quarterly, Yearly)
- Arrivals to a meeting or removal to another meeting
- Couples declaring intention to marry
- Those appointed to attend marriages
- Disciplinary issues:
 - Marrying outside the faith
 - Not attending meetings
 - Accumulating serious debt
 - Attending parties
 - Wearing fancy clothes
 - Using vulgar language
 - Taking up arms

The Monthly Meeting minutes are a snapshot of the situation of a given meeting. Personalities, disagreements, the impending separation brought on by schisms (as a result of visiting ministers preaching more on Scripture or more on the “inner light”) can be seen in these minutes. And when the Overseers mention that someone has done something against the faith’s discipline, it is the minutes that will give you the breach of discipline, those assigned to talk to the wayward member, the results of the meeting, and the decision of the Meeting as to what to do with the individual who broke the rules.

Marriage Records

A couple wishing to marry will first declare their intent within the Monthly Meeting. At that time a men’s committee and a women’s committee will be selected to visit the respective groom and bride and to determine if the parties are “clear” to marry. This means making sure neither has any marital entanglements, they are both in good standing, that the parents of the couple do not have any issues with the impending marriage.

Once the committees have reported that the couple is clear, then a new selection from the Men’s meeting and the Women’s meeting will be made of those who will attend the marriage to ensure that it is handled according to the discipline of the Society of Friends. Usually a month or two later, these individuals will report to the Monthly Meeting that the marriage took place in a solemn and respectful manner.

What you will not see in the Monthly Minutes is the actual date that the couple got married. For that information you must look to find the Marriage Register that includes the year in which the couple married.

The register of marriages is a verbatim transcript of the same document that the couple is given on the day of their marriage. It includes the information about the groom and the bride, which usually includes the names of the parents of both along with where they reside (if living) or identifying them as deceased if they have died.

Following the opening identifying paragraph, the next section will include the date on which the couple was married. This will be spelled out in words, with the use of numbers for the day and the month. Some records may include the name of the month as well. Also, in this paragraph you will find the ceremony (for lack of a better word) that the couple engages in. It consists of the promises made by each. Up to this point of the document, the bride is always referred to by her maiden name. However, after the promises, there will be the names of the groom (where he signed on the original certificate the couple keeps) and the new married name of the bride.

What makes the Quaker marriage documents and register copies unique is that the names of all those who attended the marriage will sign the original document. Like everything else on the original document, the names of all in attendance are transcribed into the marriage register.

Going through the names of those who signed may offer insight into potential family members or possible clues to someone being a “convinced” Quaker (a convert).

Birth, Death, Miscellaneous Events Registers

The Society of Friends does not believe in baptism. If you are seeking birth information on a Quaker in a state that has not yet begun to keep civil records of births and death, then you will need to seek out the registers that identify such information.

Like many other types of registers, these may be arranged in a chronological manner, though they usually identify all in a given family. Some of these registers may be arranged alphabetically by the first letter of the surname, though you may have to go through many pages to find your family. In some registers, when a child has married and created their own family within a meeting, the register may include a cross-reference to the new page. For females, there may be information about who they married, especially if the register is arranged by letter of the surname.

There does not seem to be a standardized system to these registers. Some of them may include births and deaths only. Some may list births the births of a family on the left-hand page of the two-page register and the deaths on the right. However, the deaths on the right may not coincide with the same person on the register line on the left page. It is important to read through both pages and figure out how the information is arranged.

For those registers with many columns, the information on a person may include:

- Information on how they joined this particular meeting (certificate of removal, acceptance, etc.)
- The name of the father and mother followed thereunder by the names of the children
- For those individuals born within the meeting, their dates of birth
- A column for Removal
- A column for Return
- A second column for Removal
- A column for disownment
- A column for date of death
- A column for place of burial
- Once a person has left that particular meeting, either as a result of moving or disownment, it is unusual to find any additional information. Likewise, it is particularly unusual to find the births of “convinced” Quakers or of those who moved into the meeting after the birth of their children.

Miscellaneous Volumes

Just as there appears to be no standardization to the creation of the birth and death volumes, likewise, you will not find that each Monthly Meeting kept registers for things such as:

- Certificates of Removals (both those leaving and those coming to a meeting)
- Lists of members (sometimes this volume also includes information such as birth, disownment, death)
- Disownments (usually arranged chronologically by year and thereunder by month; may not include the reason for the disownment)

Abstracted Records

One of the most used compilations of abstracted records is the six-volume *Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy* by William Wade Hinshaw. Each 8.5x11 volume had at least a thousand pages if not more. Despite this being a valuable resource, it is but a drop in the bucket of the records and meetings within the Society of Friends. The volumes are arranged:

- Volume 1: North Carolina
- Volume 2: New Jersey & Pennsylvania
- Volume 3: New York
- Volume 4: Ohio
- Volume 5: Ohio
- Volume 6: Virginia

Even among the states included in this collection, there are in some situations but a select few—often the oldest of meetings—included. This is because the records included in this collection are those that were housed at Swarthmore (Penn.)—where the Friends Historical Library is found on the campus of Swarthmore College.

Few know that in addition to these published volumes there are 75 microfilms of index cards of abstracted records from many other meetings. Again, these are meeting records that are housed at Swarthmore.

As a result, the records of the New England Yearly Meeting are not found within these volumes.

If the information was arranged in one of the six published volumes described above, then that information is not found among the cards that have been microfilmed. There is a cross index by surname that includes the state and the meeting in which a researcher will find individuals of that surname. It is a multi-step process:

1. Look at the Cross Index for the surname in question
2. Make note of the state and Meeting name
3. Turn to the other microfilms to find the state
4. The meetings are arranged alphabetically within the state
5. The cards of information abstracted on individuals are arranged alphabetically by surname and then given name



Final Thoughts

Effective use of the myriad of records generated by the Society of Friends requires examination of all the different volumes that may be available. Some may offer dates of events, while in the case of discipline, the full story may only be found in the Monthly Meeting minutes. It is best to use abstracts as a guide, that point you in the direction of the more detailed meeting minutes or marriage records.

Suggested Bibliography

Arnold, Lisa Parry, *Thee & Me, A Beginner's Guide to Early Quaker Records* (n.p.: Lisa Parry Arnold, 2014).

Barbour, Hugh and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988).

Berry, Ellen Thomas and David Allen Berry, *Our Quaker Ancestors* 2nd ed. (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 2022).

Frost, J. William, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

Hamm, Thomas D., *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Online Resources

- Ancestry www.ancestry.com
- Bryn Mawr College, Libraries and Collections <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/offices-services/library-information-technology-services/libraries-collections>
- FamilySearch www.familysearch.org
- FindMyPast www.findmypast.com
- Guide to the Records of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in New England (by Stattler) http://neym.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/GuideToRecordsRSOF_1997.pdf
- Haverford College Libraries, Quaker & Special Collections <https://www.haverford.edu/libraries/quaker-special-collections>
- QuakerMeetings.com https://quakermeetings.com/Plone/search_form
- Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library <https://www.swarthmore.edu/friends-historical-library>