

The Society of Friends: Research in Quaker Records

Class 3: Reading and Understanding Quaker Records

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The wealth of records created by the Society of Friends offers you a lot of possible records when trying to trace your Quaker family history. There is a lot of duplication among the different types of records, from the member registers that show the dates life events such as births, removals, disownments, and burials, to the men's and women's monthly meeting minutes which often supply context to your ancestor's life events.

Quaker Dating

Quakers do not use the names of the days of the week, nor do they use the names of the months. Their reasoning is that those names are derived from Roman and Nordic gods. Occasionally you may see a record that gives the date in traditional Quaker manner and may include a parenthetical reference to the name of the month, but such a record is unusual.

When working in the records of the various Quaker meetings you can expect to find the dates written as:

- 25th 2 mo. 1754

The day of the month is seldom identified with the word day. The number of the month is usually followed by the *mo.* abbreviation or the word *month*.

In addition, when referencing a particular day of the week, the Society of Friends refer to the number of the day of the week.

Quaker Day of the Week	Traditional Name
First day (1st day)	Sunday
Second day (2nd day)	Monday
Third day (3rd day)	Tuesday
Fourth day (4th day)	Wednesday
Fifth day (5th day)	Thursday
Sixth day (6th day)	Friday
Seventh day (7th day)	Saturday

When working in Quaker records from the United Kingdom and the American colonies before 1752, remember that a record that shows a date as 14th 7 mo. 1699 would convert to 14 September 1699 rather than 14 July 1699. As such, it is always a good idea to include the date as it originally was written

somewhere in your information, especially if you are entering the information into a family history program such as Family Tree Maker, Roots Magic, or Reunion.

Additionally, prior to 1752 it is not unusual to find records with double dating. Since Great Britain did not adopt the Gregorian Calendar until 1752, those tracing their ancestors in the UK and American Colonies will often find dates using the double dating (ex: 3rd 12th month 1730/31). When people first get involved in family history research and come across their first use of a date that has two years, they often assume that the year was in question, but in fact this is how the various clerks in areas that had not as yet adopted the Gregorian Calendar were accommodating both the “old style” (Julian) and the “new style” (Gregorian) calendars.

The Julian calendar began on March 25, known in the church as The Annunciation and known within Great Britain and its colonies as Lady Day. As such until 1752, life events for our ancestors in Great Britain and its colonies that took place between 1 January and 24 March are often written as 2 February 1720/21 to represent both the Old style (aka Julian) and the New Style (aka Gregorian) date. Within the Quaker documents you would likely see this written 2nd month 1720/21.

In 1751, the London Yearly Meeting published a missive to address the upcoming change of the first day of the year from 25 March to 1 January. Within this missive, they included a chart that showed how dates would be handled moving forward:

The	<i>Eleventh</i> <i>Twelfth</i> <i>First</i> <i>Second</i> <i>Third</i> <i>Fourth</i> <i>Fifth</i> <i>Sixth</i> <i>Seventh</i> <i>Eighth</i> <i>Ninth</i> <i>Tenth</i>	Month, called	<i>January</i> <i>February</i> <i>March</i> <i>April</i> <i>May</i> <i>June</i> <i>July</i> <i>August</i> <i>September</i> <i>October</i> <i>November</i> <i>December</i>	shall be reck- oned , and stiled the	<i>First</i> <i>Second</i> <i>Third</i> <i>Fourth</i> <i>Fifth</i> <i>Sixth</i> <i>Seventh</i> <i>Eighth</i> <i>Ninth</i> <i>Tenth</i> <i>Eleventh</i> <i>Twelfth</i>	Month of the next, and every succeed- ing Year.
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Tip: Remember that in 1752 when Great Britain adopted the Gregorian calendar, the year lost 11 days, specifically 3-13 September.

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

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 and that the potential bride is not pregnant.

Once the committees have reported that the couple are 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 within a month or two, 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.

It is always important to not only read the committee comments in the Monthly Meeting minutes, but also to view the marriage record, or what is more likely available—the marriage register. When going through the marriage document, you will become familiar with the manner in which a Quaker marriage took place, as what both the groom and bride were to say to each other is included in the document.

More importantly though are those who have signed the bottom of the marriage record indicating that they witnessed the couple's wedding. In addition to perhaps some of the Elders and overseers of the Monthly Meeting, you should expect to see representatives from both families. If one of the surnames is not present among the witnesses, it could be a clue as to how the bride or groom became a Quaker (birthright—the surname is present; convinced—the surname is not present).

Birth, Death, Miscellaneous Events Registers

Those registers that include the lists of members of Monthly Meetings have many different names:

- Birth and Death Registers
- Member Lists
- Birth, Etc. Register

What these registers offer is a snapshot of each family's interaction within that Monthly Meeting. Many of these registers will indicate when and from where a family arrived in a given Monthly Meeting. The registers are often arranged by the name of the husband, followed by the name of his wife (who is identified as his wife) and then thereunder would be the names of their children as existed while they were members of that Monthly Meeting.

Many of these registers may not include birth dates for all of the individuals of the family. Traditionally, the births are recorded for only those born of Quakers in good standing and only for those children born withing the Monthly Meeting keeping the register.

If the register is more than a birth and death styled register—in that it includes removals, returns, disownments, and restorations—then you will definitely want to use the information found within the register to guide you to the appropriate dates within the Monthly Meeting minutes. The registers usually only include the date of the removal or the disownment while the meeting minutes will offer information about where a family removed to or why a member was disowned.

When children married and had their own households, you may find cross-references to other pages for the boys (especially if the register is arranged alphabetically by first letter of the surname) or there may be reference to the name of the people that the daughters married (or a page number as well). What you seldom see in these registers is reference to the date a couple was married.

In addition to looking at the Monthly Meeting minutes, it is important to look and see if the Monthly Meeting had other volumes that addressed removals, atonements and so forth. The official certificate of removal may offer more information about a family than the mention within the meeting minutes that it was either written or accepted in the new meeting.

Finally, even if your direct ancestor does not appear to have his or her own entry as an adult within the register, it is always a good idea to view any cross-references to siblings. There may be more information to be found.

Glossary

There are several unique terms found within the Monthly Meeting minutes and other records generated by the Society of Friends. Here are some of the terms you are most likely to find:

Acknowledgement (or apology) – The manner in which a member of the Society of Friends admits to having done something against the faith’s discipline. This is written and read in front of the Monthly Meeting in a humble and contrite manner. The members then decide whether or not they will accept the apology.

Birthright Friends/Birthright Quakers – A child born to parents already members, in good standing, of the Society of Friends.

Certificate of removal – A document written by the Monthly Meeting to which a person or family belonged that indicates that the individual or family are in good standing within their Monthly Meeting. If it is known where the person(s) or family were going to settle, the certificate was often addressed to the new Monthly Meeting.

Clearness – When referring to marriage or membership it indicated that the individual was clear of entanglements (marital, financial, etc.) and able to adhere to their commitments (marriage, for instance).

Conservative Friends – These Friends trace back to the Orthodox split in 1845 that resulted in the Gurneyites (followers of Joseph John Gurney) and the Wilburites (followers of John Wilbur of Rhode Island). The Wilburites believe strongly in maintaining traditional disciplines such as plainness in dress, speech, and lifestyle; today they are known as Conservative Friends.

Convinced Friend/Convinced Quaker – An individual who was not born within the Quaker faith and has converted from another religious denomination.

Discipline, Book of – A published volume that outlines the rules of behavior, often known as “faith and practice” that Friends are expected to adhere to. The original Book of Discipline was published in 1785 and there have been revisions every 20 years or so.

Disownment – The method by which the Society of Friends terminates membership of an individual. It is a last resort after members have worked hard to help the individual see the error of their ways. Once disowned, the individual could rejoin the Society through restoration if they accept what they did, admit that it was wrong, apologize for doing so, and show a true desire to follow the faith and practice.

Disunity – A term that could indicate disagreement within a Monthly Meeting. The arguments and chaos that predicated the Hicksite schism would be a good example of disunity. Another definition, as seen in disownments, is when the individual has joined another religious society, as that would not be considered in unity with the Society of Friends.

Elders – Those members, usually older men and women, of a Monthly Meeting who were originally appointed to oversee the religious and moral health of the meeting's members. (see Overseers)

Epistles – Official, or formal, communications sent from other meetings. These often came from the Yearly and Quarterly Meetings and usually addressed spiritual issues within the Society.

Evangelical Friends International – Traces their origins back to the Wilburite/Gurneyite schism among the Orthodox Friends in 1845. Those who followed the teachings and beliefs of Joseph John Gurney, an English Quaker who believed in including certain activities such as having an established minister, including sacraments such as baptism and communion, and having an established program for their worship service. The Gurneyites split in 1947 with one offshoot being known as Evangelical. This group eventually adopted the name Evangelical Friends International in 1990.

Free Quakers – Founded in 1781 by a group of Philadelphia Quakers who had been disowned because of their support of the American Revolution. Within their Book of Discipline, they eliminated disownment. Their last meeting for worship took place in 1836.

Gurneyites – Orthodox Quakers who followed Joseph John Gurney in a schism that took place in 1845. (see Evangelical Friends International)

Hicksite Quakers – The name taken by the Quakers who followed Elias Hicks, who believed more heavily in relying on the “inner light” over Scriptures. This schism took place in 1827 and was the first major separation within the Society of Friends. Today, they are known as the Friends General Conference.

Indulged Meeting – The name of a meeting whose members have requested that their meeting be considered as a formal meeting. They would be overseen by the local Monthly Meeting until they became a Preparative Meeting—the next level before becoming a Monthly Meeting.

Laid Down: The term that indicates that a Monthly Meeting was officially discontinued.

Liberal Friends – Tracing back to the late 1800s, these Quakers were influenced by Darwin's scientific theory of evolution as well as other scientific beliefs that had them questioning the total authority of the Scriptures. Today they form about 20% of Quakers around the world. They look at their faith as being manifested more in their practice than in belief.

Married Contrary to Discipline – Refers to a marriage of two Quakers who were married by a justice of the peace, a priest, or minister of another denomination, rather than within the Quaker meeting itself and under the discipline of a Quaker marriage.

Married Out of Unity – Refers to a marriage in which a Quaker has married someone who is not a member of the Society of Friends.

Meeting – The term used to identify the variety of worship and business events that the Quakers attended. It is also used to identify the corporate bodies of members at different levels.

Meetings for Sufferings – Committees that were established to document the abuse of Friends because of their faith: confiscation of property, fines, incarceration, banishment. These committees originated in England due to the harsh penalties applied by the English government for not attending the established church. Such meetings did follow the Quakers as they migrated to the American Colonies.

Ministers – The term given to men and women alike who had been identified as having a particular gift in speaking the truths and sharing inspiration by the Spirit of God. They were not paid, but they were officially selected by their Monthly Meeting and given this title.

Minutes – The written official records of the meeting that were the responsibility of the appointed Clerk. These records include many aspects of the business of a meeting and have to do with discipline and disownment, marriages, the business of funding a new meetinghouse or building a school and more. Prior to 1900 you will usually find Men's minutes and Women's minutes because their meetings were held separately.

Monthly Meeting – The main unit of administration, called such because they met one a month for business which could do with acquiring or dispersing funds but also had to do with the moral and religious health of the meeting and where discussions of disownments are found as well as requests for permission to marry, the need for a certificate of removal and so on.

Orthodox Quakers – The term used after the 1827 "Great Separation" to identify those Friends who had not followed Elias Hicks. Orthodox Quakers leaned more heavily on Scripture rather than revelation for religious truths. (see Hicksite Quakers)

Overseers – A committee of appointed Friends whose position required them to watch over the moral and physical health of the Friends within their meeting. The overseers were often the ones to bring to the attention of the Monthly Meeting any discipline issues a Friend was having.

Particular Meeting – A small meeting (in terms of members) who required oversight by a Monthly Meeting until it became established.

Preparative Meeting – A single congregation that could hold business meetings but reported to the Monthly Meeting. It was the middle step from an indulged meeting to becoming a Monthly Meeting.

Quarterly Meeting – A larger meeting that consisted of several Monthly Meetings and the interim level meeting between Monthly Meetings and the Yearly Meeting for that region. Gets its name because it was held four times a year.

Queries – A set of questions asked by the Yearly Meeting that were created to determine the following of and adherence to the *Book of Discipline*. The “responses to queries” are often found in the meeting minutes and may be identified by number.

Testimonies – The basic practices of Quakers that included plainness in dress, speech, and life; refusal to take oaths; refusal to bear arms; refusal to tip their hats to those of social superiority; equality of men and women; and opposition to slavery.

Yearly Meeting – The highest regional level of meeting in which appointed Friends from the various Monthly Meetings gather once a year for several days. The Yearly Meeting is also responsible for any revisions to the *Book of Discipline* as well as decisions made regarding the faith and practice of that regional group of Friends.

Final Thoughts

The more you understand about the faith and practices of the Society of Friends the more you will understand many of the entries you find in their meeting minutes and which other record volumes may hold more information about a particular issue. To get the whole story of your Quaker ancestors, it is important to look at all available records.

Suggested Bibliography

Abbott, Margery Frost, et. al., *Historical Dictionary of the Friends (Quakers)* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2003).

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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 neym.orghttp://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>