

Conscience and Conflict

The Quaker Experience in the American Revolution

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The Quaker faith has been in existence for almost 375 years. George Fox, the founder of the religion, did not originally see his search for Christian enlightenment as a quest for a new religion, but that is exactly what it established. Referred to as Quakers, Friends, thee, or Children of the Light, they were initially considered a “peculiar” people due to their “unprogrammed” worship services, listening to an “inner light,” and other beliefs.

History

As Thomas D. Hamm describes in *The Quakers in America*, “The story of American Quakerism begins, as do the stories of many American faiths, on the other side of the Atlantic. The first Friends were English men and women, visionaries caught up in the tumult of the political, religious, and social upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s in the British Isles.”

George Fox was born in 1624 in Leicestershire, in the Midlands of England, the son of Puritans. William Penn, in Fox’s autobiography, described Fox, from childhood, as “of another frame of mind than the rest of his brethren; being more religious, inward, still, solid, and observing, beyond his years, as the answers he would give, and the questions he would put upon occasion manifested, to the astonishment of those that heard him, especially in divine things.”

Fox traveled much in the 1640s seeking religious guidance and finding only disappointment in how he was treated by the “priests” (ministers) he interacted with. Like many “separatists” of the time (before the Commonwealth period 1649-1660), he did not like using the names of the days of the week given their links to the heathen divinities. He underwent a profound spiritual change in 1647 when he began to speak out about his beliefs and actively began his ministry.

Note: Fox believed and built his religion on one elemental truth, “that every man was enlightened by the divine Light of Christ.”

It was while Fox and his Friends were in Nottingham in 1648 that he preached against the minister there and found himself taken by officers to jail; though he would be taken to the sheriff’s house, a man named John Reckless, in which Fox would lead some meetings. From this, Fox was returned to jail as the sheriff and others began to speak out exhorting the mayor and magistrates to repent. This was not the last time Fox, and his followers, would find themselves jailed for their beliefs. It would not be until the Act of Toleration in 1689 that religious persecution of the Quakers would end in England, though there would



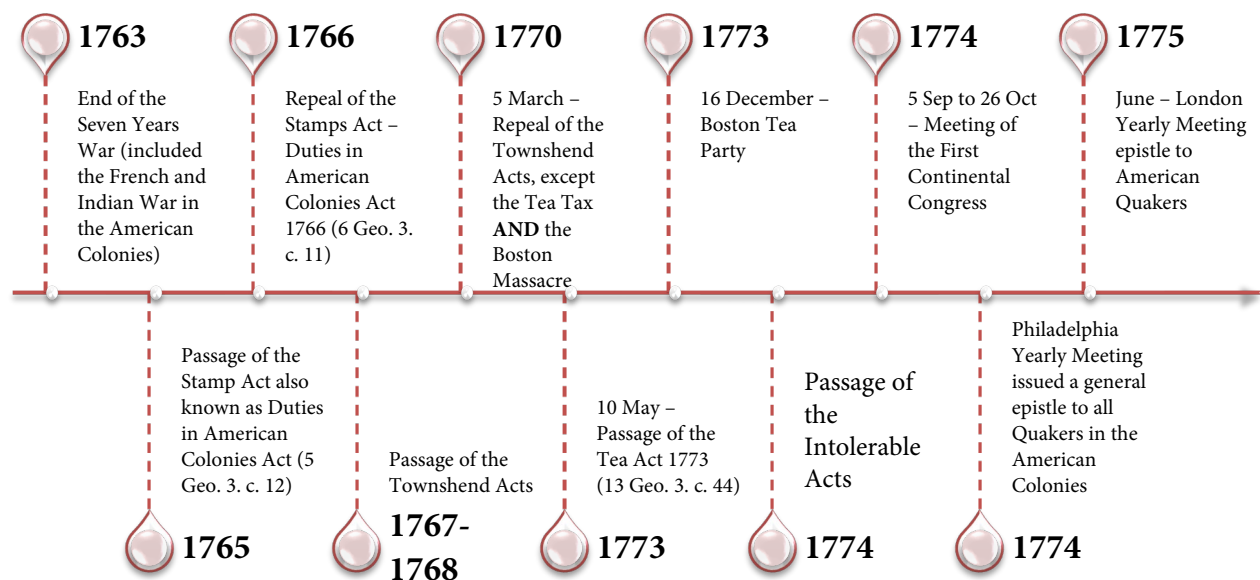
be persecution in America well after this (e.g., in response to their refusal to fight in the American Revolution, beliefs on slavery, etc.).

In 1652, Fox came upon Swarthmore Hall in the Furness District, where he met the Fell family and Margaret Fell, who would come to follow his beliefs. Only Margaret's husband, Thomas, and their one son did not become Quakers. Margaret Fell was also persecuted for her Quaker beliefs, being jailed from 1664 until 1668. In 1669, now widowed, she married Fox and returned to Lancashire where she was brought up on charges against the Conventicle Act of 1664 that forbid religious gatherings of more than five people other than immediate family, outside of meetings of the Church of England. The Fell home, Swarthmore Hall, would become the headquarters of the Quaker movement.

The first Quaker missionaries to North America arrived in 1655-1656. Rhode Island accepted their teachings and held the first New England Yearly Meeting in 1661. Massachusetts Bay Colony was not as accommodating. Fox himself traveled to America in 1672-1673 and visited many of the established meetings and even preached in Rhode Island and North Carolina. With these seeds sown, in 1681 William Penn arrived with his charter for Pennsylvania and a boat of followers.

Historical Context

Understanding what led up to the American Revolution may assist in understanding the Quaker experience of this time, especially those in Philadelphia who, as merchants, had strong ties to fellow merchants in England.



Quaker Beliefs

The core tenants of Quaker theology focus on inner direction and being a good, honest, and temperate individual. Quakers are pacifists by nature, but such a nature can be pushed to the test when it comes to war. While most will say they will not take up arms, the Quakers went beyond this. Many of their beliefs are well-known:

- Do not take up arms in violence
- Do not swear oaths
- Do not support paid ministry
- Do not remove hats in admiration upon meeting
- Do not pay taxes to support the war

However, throughout the American Revolution, the Quakers found there were many other situations that required the meeting's consideration. This included, but was not limited to:

- Not being reimbursed for foods, animals, tools, and other items taken by either the Provisional/Continental Army or the British Army
- Not sitting on committees that were making decisions about the war and those who partook in it
- Not buying or acquiring "prize goods" (goods taken by force by privateer ships, etc.)
- Not showing celebration of success of a battle (through candles in the windows, for instance)

There was much thought put into situations that could be seen to support one side or the other.

Massachusetts

Boston Tea Party

While most are aware of the Boston Tea Party—the event where hundreds of bushels of tea were thrown overboard on the night of 16 December 1773 and may even know the names of the ships involved—few know the Quaker ties to this event.

The three ships, *Dartmouth*, *Beaver*, and *Eleanor*, were all returning from previous trips. The *Dartmouth*, for instance, had taken whale oil to England and returned with tea. The *Dartmouth* was owned by Francis Rotch. The *Beaver* had been off Rainsford Island for a week due to the crew having been infected with smallpox. This ship was owned by Francis' brother, William Rotch. The *Eleanor* was owned by John Rowe. Both Francis Rotch and his brother William were staunch members of the Society of Friends.

Francis Rotch happened to be at the dock when the *Dartmouth* was trying to land. He could sense that emotions were running high and he sought permission to send the ship back to England. His pleas were denied and the rest was history.

Of course, once the war got underway, there were many other situations that would find Quakers either trying to remain neutral or see nothing wrong in being involved in certain activities provided they didn't take up arms.



William Rotch

The above-mentioned William Rotch found himself involved heavily with situations and decisions when war broke out. His 1814 memoir begins in 1774 and goes through 1794; within its pages he details the ordeal of trying to follow his beliefs while also trying to save the island of Nantucket and its people (approximately 700 families) from both sides of the war. Nantucket was cut off from the colony of Massachusetts and relied heavily on shipping to survive. His efforts, at times, saw him accused of treason, though the complainant would eventually request dismissal of the case. Much has been written about William Rotch, and some of the resources can be found in the Bibliography.

Pennsylvania

Despite Pennsylvania having been established by William Penn, by the 1770s, many of its residents felt that the Quakers were Tories at heart. John Lansing, who served as aide to Philip Schuyler, one of the generals of the Continental Army, wrote a letter to George Washington's aide-de-camp, Richard Varick, dated April 10, 1777, stating "This Town is the asylum of the disaffected the very air is contagious and its Inhabitants breathe Toryism is perfection. The Quakers in general are wolves in Sheep's Cloathing and while they shelter themselves under the pretext of conscientious Scruples they are the more dangerous..."

Many Quakers found themselves under such scrutiny and were tried on various claims of treason—at least the men—which left their wives to fend for themselves as their husbands were jailed. Quaker meeting minutes, diaries, and letters are a valuable resource in learning how the Friends handled these suspicions. It did not help that they viewed the patriots' attack on the British government as the worst of the issues against their beliefs. It was not that they were necessarily Tories, but more that their religious beliefs did not comprehend the violence undertaken by the patriots against the established government.

In 1777, a document purporting to come from the Spanktown Yearly Meeting, appeared to show that the Quakers gave aid to the British. Supposedly, General Sullivan sent a letter from Hanover, dated August 25, 1777, in which he stated, "Among the baggage taken on Staten Island [of an English officer] the 22d instant, I find a number of important papers; a copy of three I inclose for the perusal of Congress." This was sent to the Pennsylvania Congress in Philadelphia. One of the pages had the following questions on it:

- No. 1. Where is Washington, what number of men or casson?
- No. 2. Where is Sterling, what number omen and casson?
- No. 3. Where is Sullivan? &c.
- No. 4. Where is Dayson and Ogden, what number?
- No. 5. Whether there be any troops passing or re-passing?
- No. 6. Intelligence from Albany.
- No. 7. Intelligence from Philadelphia.
- No. 8. Be very particular about time and place.



Information from JERSEY, 19th August, 1777

It is said General Howe landed near the Head of Chesapeak Bay, but cannot learn the particular spot nor when.

Washington lays in Pennsylvania, about twelve miles from Coryell's Ferry.

Sullivan lays about siz miles northward of Morris-Town, with about two thousand men,

Spank Town Yearly Meeting

These documents were used to accuse several Quaker men in Philadelphia, who were then arrested and eventually exiled to Virginia. Though the Quakers in Philadelphia knew these documents were forgeries, those in charge in Pennsylvania, who already suspected the Quakers to be Tory sympathizers, did not wait to seek out the validity of the documents. Eventually the documents were disproved, but the damage had been done, and the event resulted in further suspicion against the Quakers.

New York

An interesting article regarding Quakers in the Revolution, pertains to a study of those residing in Queens County, New York. Using a 1776 census (which identified all the men over 16) and several other records, the author, Joseph S. Tiedemann, aimed to see if the county's Quakers were Tories or if they adhered to their neutrality. He used the minutes from Flushing Monthly Meeting and Waterbury Monthly Meeting. He compared the activities of Quakers and non-Quakers in their support of either side. While this certainly cannot be seen as indicative of all of the Colony of New York, or other colonies in general, it is the first actual study with statistical data that could be presented and published in tabular format to show percentages of support to the Patriots or Tories, as well as those who were neutral. His results showed that 86% of the Quakers in Queens County were indeed neutral and adhering to the Quaker beliefs regarding the war. His study also showed that the larger the population of Quakers in specific towns, the more Quakers remained neutral.

North Carolina

As with Quaker populations in other colonies, those in North Carolina found themselves persecuted in one way or another. In her article, "Being a Peaceable Man, I have Suffered Much Persecution": The American Revolution and Its Effects on Quaker Religious Identity" Neva Jean Specht writes:

Quaker teaching, especially the notion of "crosses to bear," sacralized suffering, thus offering those who maintained their faith the satisfaction of casting themselves as spiritual heroes who conquered the daily obstacles as they progressed toward salvation. On a more practical level, those daily obstacles often took the form of marauding armies looking for supplies and supporters and with little patience for claims of neutrality, thus testing even the most faithful Quaker's limits.

Consequently, for most Quakers, their claim of neutrality was the worst of all possible positions.



Once again, the meeting minutes illustrate the experiences of those who tried to remain neutral. But they also show who elected to pick a side and how they were dealt with by the meeting. Disownment as a punishment was a last resort and they tried hard to convince a member of the error of his/her ways, yet they also would not allow members to ignore the beliefs they claimed to uphold.

The Queries

Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of meeting minutes from the Revolution are the queries: the questions they asked of their congregations to guide their thoughts and actions.

While there were some standard queries found in their books of discipline, additional queries could be added as necessary and such was found in the years before, during, and after the war. The query about taking oaths, paying priests wages, bearing arms or defrauding the King of his dues seemed to be one that all members could answer clearly to. When it came to military services and dealing in prize goods, the answer was less clear, and notations could be found that care needed to be taken to improve in this area.

Seeking Records

A first step in researching your Quaker ancestors is to find the Meeting they attended. For this period, you will also need to determine if that meeting existed in the mid to late 1700s. Next, consult the Men's Minutes for the Monthly Meeting. In these minutes you will find mention of those who chose to act against their faith and how the members of the meeting dealt with them. Minutes can be found at several locations, with more being added online.

In addition to religious records, seek out diaries, letters, newspaper articles published during the war, and scholarly articles and books. Articles and books offer insight into the entire subject but may also lead you to other repositories or collections.

Suggested Bibliography

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