



# NORTH CAROLINA FRIENDS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

<http://ncfhs.org>

[ncfhs@ncfhs.org](mailto:ncfhs@ncfhs.org)

POST OFFICE BOX 8502, GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA 27419-0502

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NEWSLETTER

GERTRUDE BEAL AND MARTHA DENTISTE, CO-EDITORS

Quakerism in North Carolina 1672 – 2022  
Commemorating Our 350-Year Heritage

We are delighted to offer this article by Max L. Carter, “Quaker Settlement in the Carolinas.” This is based on several recent class offerings at Friends Homes and the Shepherd’s Center, both located in Greensboro.

## *Quaker Settlement in the Carolinas*

Quakerism, a movement that began during the Civil War period in England during the 1640s and 1650s, proved to be an attractive religion in the Carolina backcountry of the latter 17<sup>th</sup> century. This essay will explore some of the particulars of that attraction in the Albemarle region of the Carolina colony, but the universal appeal of Quakerism’s distinctive spiritual and social testimonies cannot be discounted.

Wilmer Cooper’s *A Living Faith: An Historical and Comparative Study of Quaker Beliefs* (Friends United Press, 1990) describes four spiritual testimonies that defined early Quaker understanding: 1) Direct and immediate access to God as an Inward Light; 2) The gathered meeting as a community of discernment; 3) The possibility of “holy

obedience;” and 4) The sacramental nature of all of life. From these spiritual truths came the familiar social testimonies of Friends: peace, equality, simplicity, and integrity.

Each of these would factor into the readiness with which many of the “unchurched” residents of the Carolina wilderness would respond to the “witness to Truth” of the Quakers who brought their message. Realities of the colony, too, would create a sympathetic setting for that message. Named “Carolina” after England’s King Charles II, the colony’s character was informed by the Fundamental Constitution of 1669. That document was influenced by the contributions of John Locke, whose Enlightenment philosophy emphasized religious tolerance and a belief that humans are born *tabula rasa* – a “blank slate” – rather than the “utterly depraved” persons of Calvinist theology.

Even before the Fundamental Constitution, the family of Quaker Henry Phillips (Phelps) had settled in the Great Dismal Swamp area of

Carolina. Refugees from the persecution of Quakers in New England, the Phillips family had moved to Virginia, eventually crossing over the border into the more tolerant – and isolated – territory of the colony. They would live there for seven years before seeing another Quaker.

That Quaker would be William Edmondson (1627-1712). The Friend who brought Quakerism to Ireland, Edmondson undertook a missionary journey to the American colonies in the early 1670s, entering Carolina in Fifth Month (May) of 1672. The following description of Edmondson's first experience in the colony (he would return in 1675) is excerpted from his journal (Copy in the Quaker Archives, Guilford College):

"Entering into Carolina, all was wilderness and no English inhabitants – and no pathways. The first night we lay in the woods in wet weather, sore spoiled in the swamps and rivers. We were at a loss as to which way to go. My companions were very discouraged and purposed to turn back, but I turned my mind to the Lord, and as He led me, I led the way. Eventually I left my companions by a fire and went on. I found a small path and followed it until dark. It was raining violently. I walked all night but couldn't lie down on the ground as my clothes were wet to the skin, even though I was very weary and had eaten little. I then returned to my companions after seeing a light on the horizon and fetched them to follow the path I had found.

This path led to Henry Phillip's house, and he wept to see another Friend. It being a First-day (Sunday), I

asked him to send for people at midday, and then I lay down for a little.

The people who gathered had little or no religion and smoked pipes in meeting. But in a little time, the Lord's testimony arose in the authority of His power, and their hearts being reached with it, several of them were tendered and received the testimony. After meeting, they desired me to stay with them and let them have more meetings.

One of those convinced was Justice of the Peace Toms. He invited me to hold meetings at their home, where more were convinced. From thence, we went on to Virginia."

Remarkably, the next Quaker from across the Atlantic that the Phillips family met was George Fox (1624-1691). One of the founders of the Quaker movement, Fox, too, traveled to the American colonies in 1672 to "bear witness to Truth." An excerpt from his journal (Nickalls edition, 1975) follows:

"And now they say we are 1,000 miles from Boston southward, they that have travelled it; all which we have travelled by land, and down bays, and over rivers, and creeks, and bogs, and wilderness. At the first house we came to in Carolina we met with an Indian king, a pretty, sober man. The Truth spreadeth....We had a meeting at Joseph Scott's house who is one of their burgesses. And many of the people were there, and were tender, and a sound precious meeting there was, blessed by the Lord; and the people much desired after meetings. And on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of [November] we passed by water four miles to Henry Phillips's house, and at the meeting there was the governor's

secretary of the province, which formerly had been convinced. On the 29<sup>th</sup> day, I went among the Indians. Their young king and others of their chief men were very loving, and received what I said to them....Now having visited the north part of Carolina and made a little entrance for Truth upon the people there, we began to return towards Virginia.”

In today’s Suffolk County, Virginia, Fox visited “Summers’ Towne,” where another gathering to hear him led to the establishment of the Somerton Friends Meeting, still in existence and observing its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary along with that of 350 years of Quaker community in North Carolina.

Why was there such a ready community for responding to the “Truth” presented by Edmondson and Fox? We can’t discount the attractiveness of a message that emphasized each individual’s access to God directly, without need of a mediator. Nor can we overestimate the impact of a message that *all* might achieve “salvation,” not merely a few “Elect.” But there were factors unique to the Carolina backcountry that also made Quakerism attractive.

For one, Quakerism’s simple religious form made it ideal for taking root in a wilderness where few ordained clergy would choose to settle. Educated in the finest universities of England and accustomed to a guaranteed income with benefits, Anglican priests would be

hesitant to exchange that for life in the Great Dismal Swamp. Quaker worship required no such “mediators of the Divine.” With no outward sacraments required and no ornamented “steeplehouses” needed, Quaker faith needed only a gathered group waiting in expectant silence for the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

That also meant no required church tithes! Among a people already burdened by taxation on limited incomes<sup>1</sup>, a religion that imposed no additional economic burden had its appeal. Nor, as mentioned above, was there any need to support a resident parson, equip a “manse,” and provide for the family of a clergyperson.

There was also the fact of Quakerism’s testimony against war and the preparation for war. With local militias forming for the purpose of rebellion against the government – and the government’s desire to raise militias both to put down rebellion and to engage the aboriginal inhabitants of the region, there were those attracted to a faith that took seriously Jesus’ admonition against taking up arms.

For a variety of reasons, then, Quakerism took root in the Albemarle region of northeastern Carolina. By the 1690s, there was a Quaker governor of the colony, John Archdale (1642-1712); a majority Quaker membership in the colonial Assembly; the first organized Christian religion in the colony, North Carolina Yearly Meeting in 1698; and the first public school, Symond’s Creek,

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<sup>1</sup> In 1672, Parliament passed the “Navigation Act” which taxed such goods as tobacco, a product inhabitants of the Albemarle region relied on for income. Such taxation led in 1677 to “Culpeper’s Rebellion,” a violent attempt at taking over the government of the colony.



established in 1705 by Quakers in Pasquotank County.

Quakerism's predominance so alarmed Parliament and the Church of England that missionary societies were formed, in part, to counter the influence of Quakerism in the colonies. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK, 1698) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG, 1701) were established, ostensibly, for educating enslaved persons in the Christian faith and combatting immorality among residents of England and its colonies. But Quakerism, viewed as a heretical faith, was also a target.

Among the SPG missionaries dispatched to the colonies was George Keith (1639-1716). An early convert to Quakerism, he had traveled with George Fox, William Penn, and Robert Barclay to The Netherlands and Germany in 1677, convincing, among others, many Mennonites who became Quakers and later were among the first German settlers in Pennsylvania in 1683. In the 1690s, however, Keith broke with Friends, believing Quakerism, itself, had broken with orthodox Christianity. He formed a short-lived group of "Christian Quakers," also known as "Keithian Quakers," and was disowned. Rejoining the Church of England, he was an SPG missionary to America from

1702 to 1704, where he sought to "win back" Quakers.

Attempts by SPCK and SPG missionaries such as Keith were unsuccessful, including in Carolina. It was reported back to England that the colony was "under a dark cloud of Quakerism."

Where missionary attempts were unsuccessful in removing Quaker influence – at least politically – from Carolina, the ascendancy of Queen Anne to the throne was more effective. In 1704, Parliament required an oath of allegiance to the new queen. Quakers, opposed to oath taking as a violation of the integrity testimony<sup>2</sup>, refused to take the oath and were excluded from government. Later, a short-lived attempt to re-instate Friends in government was made by John Archdale's stepson, Thomas Cary (?-1718), but by 1711 Quaker political influence in the colony was over.<sup>3</sup>

While Quakers after 1711 were no longer influential in government, their presence remained strong in Perquimans and Pasquotank Counties. Eventually there were twelve Friends meetings in the region, and from there Friends moved inland as far as navigable waters and primitive pathways could take them. Today's Quaker presence in Northampton and

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<sup>2</sup> Quakers have historically opposed oaths both for reasons of the Bible's instruction not to (Matthew 5:34) and for an oath's implication that at other times one might not be telling the truth. Integrity demands of Quakers that one be truthful at all times.

<sup>3</sup> "Cary's Rebellion" describes a period in the early 1700s when Cary, a former deputy governor in Carolina and initially a supporter of the oath that excluded Quakers from government, returned to power and supported dissenters and the "Quaker party" in their opposition to the previous colonial government. From 1708 to 1710, Quakers again dominated the government, but the rebellion was put down in 1711.

Wayne Counties traces its origins to those early settlers.

Today there remains evidence of the strength of that early Quaker community in the Albemarle region – beyond the “Quaker Activity” historical marker near Hertford, Perquimans County. The historic Newbold-White House, built in 1730 on the same grounds where George Fox met in the home of Joseph Scott, served Quaker congregations for many decades and continues to welcome visitors as an historic site. The town of Belvidere, drawing its name from the plantation home of Quaker Thomas Newby, contains wonderful examples of early Quaker architecture and the influence of the Whites, Winslows, Newbys, Nicholsons, and Truebloods who lived there. While Piney Woods is the only remaining meeting of the original twelve, Up River Friends Meeting, established after the Civil War through the efforts of the Baltimore Association, continues to hold worship.

Until the 1790s, annual sessions of North Carolina Yearly Meeting rotated between the Quaker community in Perquimans and Pasquotank Counties and the New Garden settlement in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. With the adoption in 1778 by the Yearly Meeting of a testimony against slavery, migration of Friends out of the plantation and slavery culture of the fertile flatlands of northeastern North Carolina began in earnest, eventually decimating the Quaker population of the region. The history of that decline and the development of a new center of North Carolina Quakerism will be the subject of future installments in the

commemoration of 350 years of Quaker community in the Old North State.

- Max L. Carter

### *Events of the 350th Commemoration of Quaker Community in the Carolinas*

Several programs in observance of the 1672 visit by William Edmondson (also spelled Edmundson) and George Fox to the Carolinas have already been held, with many more yet to come. A series on N.C. Quaker history was given by a member of NCFHS at both campuses of Friends Homes and for the Shepherd's Center of Greensboro. Nearly 200 people attended the three events. The same series has been recorded and is available courtesy of Friends in New England Yearly Meeting: <http://quakerkathleen.org/millcityquakers/> A shortened version of the series was given by Max Carter for the annual meeting of the Perquimans County Restoration Society in early March.

Several tours of the historic New Garden Friends graveyard and the New Garden Underground Railroad Woods have also been offered. For information about scheduled tours of the woods, contact [danielscw@guilford.edu](mailto:danielscw@guilford.edu). To schedule a cemetery tour, contact [mcarter@guilford.edu](mailto:mcarter@guilford.edu). A book about the New Garden burial ground by NCFHS members Gertrude Beal and Max Carter is available through Scuppernong Books ([www.scuppernongbooks.org](http://www.scuppernongbooks.org)).

A tour of the Albemarle Region where Quakerism first took root in the Carolinas is tentatively scheduled for mid-September. Follow the NCFHS web

page and Facebook page for details.  
Other events being planned:

A dedication of the Greensboro City-sponsored sign welcoming people to the Historic New Garden/Guilford College Heritage Community (on West Friendly Ave. near I-840). TBA, but probably in April.

A reading of Josephine Rhoades Davis' 1929 play, "Our Legacy: A Tribute to George Fox and William Edmundson," written on the occasion of the dedication of a marker in Hertford, Perquimans County, in honor of the Edmundson/Fox visit.

An original play about the Edmundson/Fox visit by playwright and orchardist Frank Levering, in cooperation with the Theatre Studies Department of Guilford College.

A speaker, Noeleen McIlvenna, author of a book on the Albemarle Region in the late 1600s, at Guilford College in the fall.

Somerton Friends' 350th anniversary celebrations September 25.

Again, follow the NCFHS web page and Facebook page for details as they develop.

*Gas Marts, Convenience Stores, and Quakers (From a recent post on the NCFHS Facebook page)*

Recent news that another gas mart/convenience store chain has its eye on opening outlets in N.C. has many people going gaga over Wawa! The Philadelphia-based business is a "cult brand" in that area and has now spread as far as Florida. It was increasingly popularized with the HBO series "Mare of Easttown," which starred not only Kate Winslet but Wawa stores, too! Wawa traces its origins to the New Jersey Quaker Wood family. They started an iron foundry in 1803, and in 1890, George Wood decided to show his mettle by expanding into dairy. He purchased 1,000 acres of land south of Philadelphia in Wawa, PA, and opened a dairy processing plant. Even though he was from Jersey, he bought his first herd of cows from the British island of Guernsey, and today Holsteins graze around the company headquarters! The convenience store offspring of the dairy was started by Grahame Wood in 1964. Interestingly enough, the Wawa farm was located near a mill once operated by the Quaker Newlin family -- ancestors of the Newlins who migrated to North Carolina in the late 1700s. And now Wawa, itself, is migrating south!

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*Quaker History* is published semiannually by the Friends Historical Association in Haverford, PA. It contains historical articles on Quakers and is available to NCFHS members at the discounted price of \$15.00 per year. If you would like to receive the publication, please add \$15.00 to your annual membership fee. (For example, an Individual Membership with *Quaker History* is \$45.)

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**NCFHS Newsletter**

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**SPECIAL NOTE: If you have not done so, please take this opportunity to renew your membership in the North Carolina Friends Historical Society for 2022. Thank you!**