A Friend Among Quakers

by William C. Kashatus

On the balmy evening of May 3, 1784, Anthony Benezet affectionately bade farewell to his wife Joyce. Philadelphia's most admired Quaker reformer, suffering from a prolonged illness, realized that death was near and took to his bed on the second story of their modest Chestnut Street residence.

"We have lived long, in love and peace," he comforted his spouse of forty-eight years. Having given much consideration over the beneficiaries of his small estate, Benezet counseled Joyce to transfer, at her death, their house and seven hundred pounds to the trustees of the African School he had founded fourteen years earlier. The money would be used to "hire and employ a religious-minded person or persons to teach a number of Negro, Mulatto, or Indian children to read and write." This final gesture underscored the fundamental purpose of Benezet's life: to assist the disadvantaged residents of Philadelphia. For a man who had committed himself unconditionally to further the causes of abolitionism and charity schooling, his last words were unusual—and unsettling. "I am dying," he uttered, "and I feel ashamed to meet the face of my Maker, for I have done so little in His cause."

Anthony Benezet abandoned business pursuits to teach (above). In his will, he left instructions on how best to continue his work and asked his wife to leave, upon her demise, their residence to the African School which he had founded in 1780 (both facing page).

The seventy-one-year-old abolitionist and reformer was laid to rest the following day. His funeral procession, described as the "largest that had ever been seen in Philadelphia," included more than four hundred black mourners, "who walked in the rear." Despite the large turnout, the funeral was simple, in accordance with Benezet's wishes. "If contrary to my desire, you insist on paying tribute to my memory," he directed in his last will and

testament, "you may say: 'Anthony Benezet was a poor creature, and through Divine favor was enabled to know it.'"

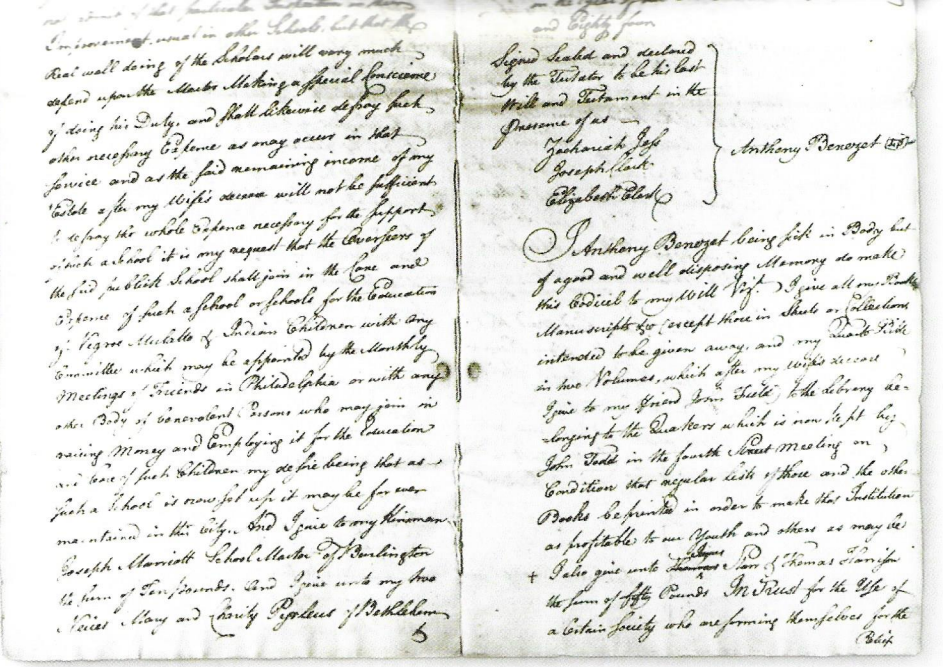
Best known for his humility and tireless devotion to the education and uplifting of Philadelphia's African American community, Benezet was also a model Quaker who figured prominently in the spiritual reformation of the Religious Society of Friends during the eighteenth century. Without his persistent efforts, Quakerism in Philadelphia may have succumbed to the political infighting, eroding discipline, and ostentatious way of life that had gripped the Society by 1750. Benezet's leadership within the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the governing body of Friends in southeastern Pennsylvania, resulted in a landmark redefinition of Quakers as active agents in the abolition of slavery and the promulgation of educational reform.

Born on January 31, 1713, at St. Quentin, France, Benezet was one of seven children of Judith and John Stephen Benezet, French Huguenots who left France in 1715 to escape religious persecution. After a brief stay with relatives in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, the family moved to London and, in 1731, sailed to Philadelphia. Young Anthony Benezet, who had served as an apprentice at a London counting house, entered the mercantile business, following in his father's footsteps. He quickly became bored with dealing in commodities, though.

During these early years, Benezet struggled to find a calling that would complement his fervent piety and reserved demeanor. Attracted by the Quaker sympathy for human suffering, he joined the Society of Friends not long after arriving in Philadelphia. In 1736, he married Joyce Marriott, a Quaker minister in Burlington, New Jersey. Suffering the deaths of two infants over the next few years, Benezet grew especially compassionate towards young children. After yet another unsatisfactory attempt in business in Wilmington, Delaware, the thirty-year-old Benezet returned to Philadelphia in 1739 and began teaching school in Germantown. He had finally discovered his calling.

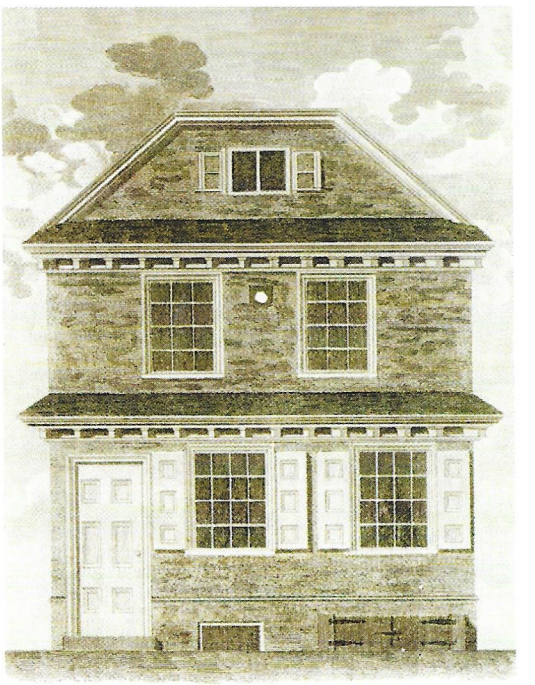
Devoid of worldly ambition, Benezet dressed plainly and led a simple life, devoting most of his energy to teaching. He taught eight hours a day for six days a week in a small, dilapidated building. In 1742, he accepted the position of master at the Friends Public School on Fourth Street, below Chestnut. Founded by William Penn, the Friends Public School was Philadelphia's oldest and most prestigious school. From its beginnings, the school provided an elementary education to both Quaker and non-Quaker students, rich and poor, in keeping with the Friends' emphasis on social outreach. For twelve years, Benezet served the school, replacing corporal punishment with gentle admonition. He emphasized critical thinking rather than rote memorization, which he believed stifled the natural intelligence of students. In 1750, he began tutoring free blacks and slaves at night in his home. The overseers of the Friends Public School most likely were grateful to Benezet for accepting the task of educating blacks, something they did not relish tackling themselves because of the controversy surrounding the issue. Benezet's appointment as overseer confirmed that fact, but did little more. By that time, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was struggling to restore the integrity of Quaker faith and practice among its members.

The steady economic growth of Philadelphia during the first half of the eighteenth century led to the rise of an aristocracy, well-fixed financially and socially, which included prominent Quaker families. The acquisition of great wealth resulted in the laxity of religious discipline and a temptation to indulge in luxury and ostentatious living. The education offered by the Friends Public School had also become elite, catering to the children of wealthy Friends and emphasizing a classical curriculum, rather than the practical course of instruction upon which it was established. Quaker involvement in Pennsylvania government was also coming into conflict with the Society of Friends' Peace Testimony, as non-Quaker settlers increasingly lobbied the assembly for a militia. By 1756, with the outbreak of the French and Indian War, financial prosper-



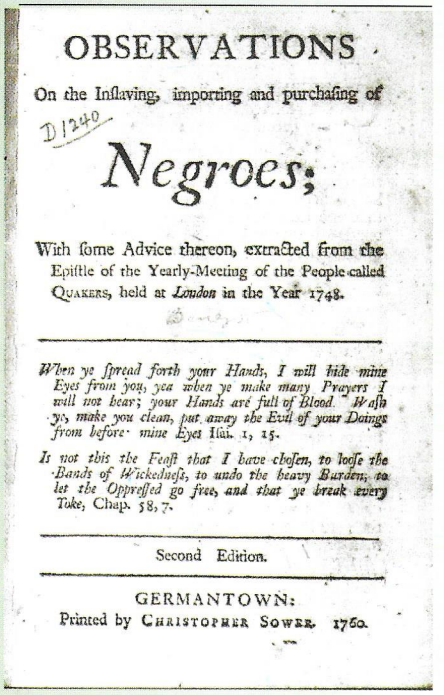
Signed Sealed and declared by the Testator to be his last Will and Testament in the presence of us
Zachariah Jess
Joseph Clark
Elizabeth Black
} Anthony Benezet [Seal]

I Anthony Benezet being sick in Body but of sound and well disposing Memory do make this Codicil to my Will viz. I give all my Books Manuscripts &c except those in Sheets or Collections intended to be given away, and my Quarto Bible in two Volumes, which after my wife's decease I give to my friend John Field & the Library belonging to the Quakers which is now kept by John Todd in the fourth Street meeting on Condition that regular Lists of those and the other Books be printed in order to make this Institution as profitable to the Youth and others as may be + Also I give unto James Son of Thomas Harrison the Sum of fifty Pounds In Trust for the Use of a Certain Society who are forming themselves for the Relief



"I feel ashamed to meet the face of my Maker, for I have done so little in His cause."

A strict Quaker, Benezet abhorred vanity and worldly fashion (above). He entreated fellow Friends to free their slaves (below). The Friendly Association, for which Benezet served as a trustee, issued peace medals (facing page), which were presented to American Indian chiefs to promote good will. In 1778, Benezet published a pamphlet (facing page) in which he addressed the topics of war, slavery, and "bad effects of spirituous liquors."



OBSERVATIONS

On the Inflaving, importing and purchafing of

D1240

Negroes;

With ſome Advice thereon, extracted from the Epiſtle of the Yearly-Meeting of the People called Quakers, held at *London* in the Year 1748.

When ye ſpread forth your Hands, I will hide mine Eyes from you, yea when ye make many Prayers I will not hear; your Hands are full of Blood. Waſh ye, make you clean, put away the Evil of your Doings from before mine Eyes Iſai. 1, 15.

Is not this the Faſt that I have choſen, to looſe the Bands of Wickedneſs, to undo the heavy Burden, to let the Oppreſſed go free, and that ye break every Yoke, Chap. 58, 7.

Second Edition.

GERMANTOWN:
Printed by Christopher Sower. 1760.

ity and political expedience had compromised the fundamental integrity of Quaker faith and practice. The disturbing trend aroused a new generation of Friends to champion a return to the early Quaker testimonies on simplicity, pacifism, community, and equality.

Beginning in 1755, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting directed all members to return to simplicity in dress, habits, and way of life construed to be "vain customs of the world," such as music, theater, and art. Ministers and elders insisted that the children of Friends not mix with non-Friends at school, preferring a more guarded education. Members were exhorted to eschew slaveholding. Swift and sometimes severe disciplinary action was taken against wayward members who deviated from Quaker practice. At the center of this spiritual reformation was Anthony Benezet.

Like other spiritual reformers within the yearly meeting, Benezet sought a church that rigidly adhered to Quaker faith and practice, which resulted in a harsh, narrow-minded, doctrinal legalism. Such strict measures discouraged new members. That, of course, was never Benezet's intention. His goal was to achieve spiritual purity, even if it meant becoming unpopular. While he and other spiritual reformers constituted a small minority of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, their counsel assumed greater importance with the body over the next quarter of a century. With Benezet as its leader, the group ultimately made abolitionism synonymous with the spiritual reformation of Quakerism.

Known for his outspokenness, Benezet admonished Friends to withdraw from Pennsylvania government because it condoned slavery. "No legislature on earth can alter the nature of things," he wrote in 1762, condemning the General Assembly of Pennsylvania. "Nor can it make that to be lawful which is contrary to the law of God." If government was permitted to justify the practice of slavery, he reasoned, it could justify any crime. Instead, Benezet urged his Quaker brethren to "appeal to a Higher Law," influencing society through "true charity and humanitarian service, rather than political office."

Together with friend and fellow reformer John Woolman, Benezet convinced the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the moral evils of slavery. Acting on their counsel, the yearly meeting began in 1759 to urge Friends to free their slaves, and published Benezet's *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes*, encouraging members to take its abolitionist views to heart.

In April 1775, Benezet encouraged his yearly meeting to take the final step in making abolitionism a matter of church policy by calling the first meeting of the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully held in Bondage. Members of the anti-slavery group focused their energies on intervention in cases of blacks who claimed to have been illegally enslaved. In 1776, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting embraced Benezet's advice and directed that those members who continued to own slaves be disowned from the Religious Society of Friends.

Anthony Benezet considered the abolition of slavery as only the first step in the wholesale reformation of Quakerism. He believed that he and fellow Friends could play an important role in empowering the disadvantaged through education. "Ought not the education and training of youth to be, next to our more immediate duty to God, the chief concern of every Friend?" he asked. "The present corrupt state of the world, which prohibits our meddling with [political] offices, naturally points to us as a people, rather than others, to serve God and our country in the education of youth. If Friends would commit themselves to the education of the poor, Benezet believed, "emancipated slaves would make proper use of their liberty" and become "profitable members of society."

One of the few white men of the period who did not subscribe to the theory of black inferiority, Benezet spent considerable time educating the members of Philadelphia's African American community at his home. "I have found amongst Negroes as great a variety of talents as among a like number of whites," he wrote, "and again I am bold to assert that the notion entertained by some blacks are inferior in their capacities is a vulgar prejudice, founded on the pride and ignorance of their lordly masters, who have kept their slaves at such a distance as to be unable to form a right judgment of them." Accordingly, he taught his black students that it was the condition of slavery—and not innate inferiority—that explained their degradation by American society.

Benezet in 1770 convinced the yearly meeting to "raise a fund for the building of a large school for the free education of blacks." In autumn, the so-called "African School" opened to twenty-two male and female students, who studied reading, writing, and arithmetic in order to "qualify them for a proper enjoyment of freedom." The girls

learned sewing and knitting from a schoolmistress, while the boys completed more advanced academic work. During the following five years, a total of two hundred and fifty black students received instruction at the school. Serving as an ex-officio member, advisor, and regular contributor, Benezet set the school's policies for the remainder of his life.

During the 1780s, the school foundered in financial trouble and needed a schoolmaster. Benezet, in very poor health, nevertheless rallied and assumed the teaching responsibilities. It was during these, the last years of his life, that the Quaker educator expressed a strong concern for the vocational training of young blacks. He convinced many rural Friends to apprentice black adolescents and to pay them "sufficient compensation for their services," insisting they "not be exploited" but, rather, be prepared for "suitable trades." Although his precarious health deteriorated even more rapidly during this time, Benezet willed himself to live on, convinced his continued work for the "oppressed Africans" was the result of the "Divine Architect" who maintained "some deep purpose" for his "human frame."

While the overseers of the Friends Public School served as the liaison between the African School and the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting by providing financial support and supervision, the more comprehensive role Benezet envisioned for Quakers in the education and enlightenment of young African Americans did not transpire. Once it had abolished slavery within its own fold, the yearly meeting grew more preoccupied with the religiously guarded education it was providing for Quaker youth in the Friends Public School and smaller Quaker schools in rural southeastern Pennsylvania. Instead, Anthony Benezet's legacy would be carried on by individual Quakers who established a school for black girls in 1787 and the Society for the Establishment and Support of Charity School in 1799. Their activities provided the necessary inspiration for the nineteenth-century reformers who would promote and advance common schooling in Pennsylvania.

"No legislature on earth can alter the nature of things, nor can it make that to be lawful which is contrary to the law of God."

William C. Kashatus, of Paoli, is the author of several books and numerous essays, articles, and editorials on Pennsylvania history. He is a regular contributor to ***Pennsylvania Heritage****.*

FOR FURTHER READING

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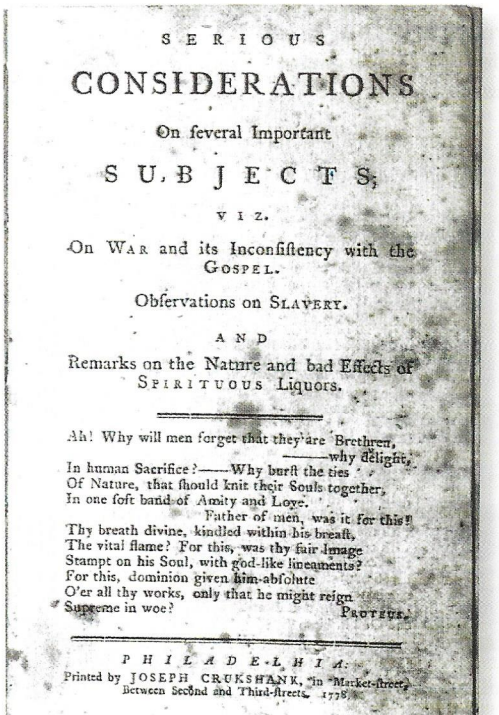

SERIOUS

CONSIDERATIONS

On several Important

SUBJECTS,

VIZ.

On War and its Inconsistency with the Gospel.

Observations on Slavery.

AND

Remarks on the Nature and bad Effects of Spirituous Liquors.

Ah! Why will men forget that they are Brethren,
——why delight,
In human Sacrifice?——Why burst the ties
Of Nature, that should knit their Souls together,
In one soft band of Amity and Love.
Father of men, was it for this?
Thy breath divine, kindled within his breast,
The vital flame? For this, was thy fair Image
Stampt on his Soul, with god-like lineaments?
For this, dominion given him absolute
O'er all thy works, only that he might reign
Supreme in woe? Proteus.

PHILADELPHIA:

Printed by JOSEPH CRUKSHANK, in Market-street, Between Second and Third-streets. 1778.