

# THE FRIENDS FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

by William C. Kashatus III

In September 1738, Quakers from throughout southeastern Pennsylvania and western New Jersey made their exodus to the small town of Burlington, a journey which marked the commencement of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, held in alternate years in the New Jersey community. Members of the Religious Society of Friends, commonly called “Quakers,” many of whom were the most respected of their local congregations or monthly meetings, gathered for silent worship and to deliberate the problems of discipline and social concerns raised by their respective monthly meetings.

The leaders of this Yearly Meeting were among the wealthiest and most powerful individuals in the Pennsylvania colony. They were largely Philadelphia merchants and tradesmen, many owning slaves or dealing actively in the slave trade. Conservative in their political and religious convictions, these Quakers sought to maintain control of the Yearly Meeting by maintaining the traditional policies of the religious society.

As Friends flocked to Burlington’s hexagonal meetinghouse for the opening session of Yearly Meeting, suspense and anxiety mounted, for inevitably there would arise some discussion of the Society’s position on slavery. This issue had been particularly explosive among Friends, as their testimony on the equality of all human be-



*It was to the hexagonal Quaker Meetinghouse in Burlington, New Jersey (above), that the dwarfish Benjamin Lay (facing page) journeyed in 1738 to demonstrate his opposition to slavery with his infamous “bladder of blood” tactic. A deeply religious individual widely known for his convictions, Lay, a former slave owner, repented by building a small cottage resembling a cave and refusing to eat food produced by slaves.*

ings suggested a fundamental contradiction between their theology and their practice. To be certain, there was at least one Quaker attending that particular Yearly Meeting whose intentions were to make this fundamental contradiction a major topic for deliberation.

Friends entered the meetinghouse, took their seats and earnestly began to settle into their silent, meditative worship. Suddenly a hunched-back dwarf strode into the building. His spindly legs,

flowing white beard and excessively large head made a ghastly impression on those who had never before experienced the preaching of Benjamin Lay. Clad in a great coat and carrying a book that resembled the Bible, Lay, who was all of fifty-five inches in height, swaggered to the front of the room and found himself a prominent seat on one of the benches, facing the body. Little did anyone realize that concealed beneath his cloak was the uniform of a militia soldier,

complete with a sword, and that the “bible” he held was actually hollowed out and contained a bladder of red berry juice—tools to help him deliver his message in the most shocking of ways.

Lay allowed a few minutes to pass. He rose and began to rebuke the Friends for their keeping of slaves. “Oh all you Negro masters who are contentedly holding your fellow creatures in a state of slavery, in direct opposition to every principle of reason, humanity and religion, you might as well throw off the plain coat as I do!” With that, Lay unfastened the button of his long coat, flinging it to the floor. Much to the dismay of these pacifist Friends, Lay stood forth in all his military glory and cried out: “It would be as justifiable in the sight of the Almighty, who beholds and respects all nations and colours of men with an equal regard, if you would thrust a sword through their hearts as I do through this book!” The gathering, growing alarmed, became hysterical as the eccentric dwarf drew his sword and pierced the book’s bladder so that its blood red contents sprayed over those seated near him. For his provocative actions, Benjamin Lay earned the wrath of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting which expressed its displeasure by disowning him from the Religious Society of Friends.

For half a century before Lay’s infamous “bladder of blood” demonstration, individual Quakers had ques-







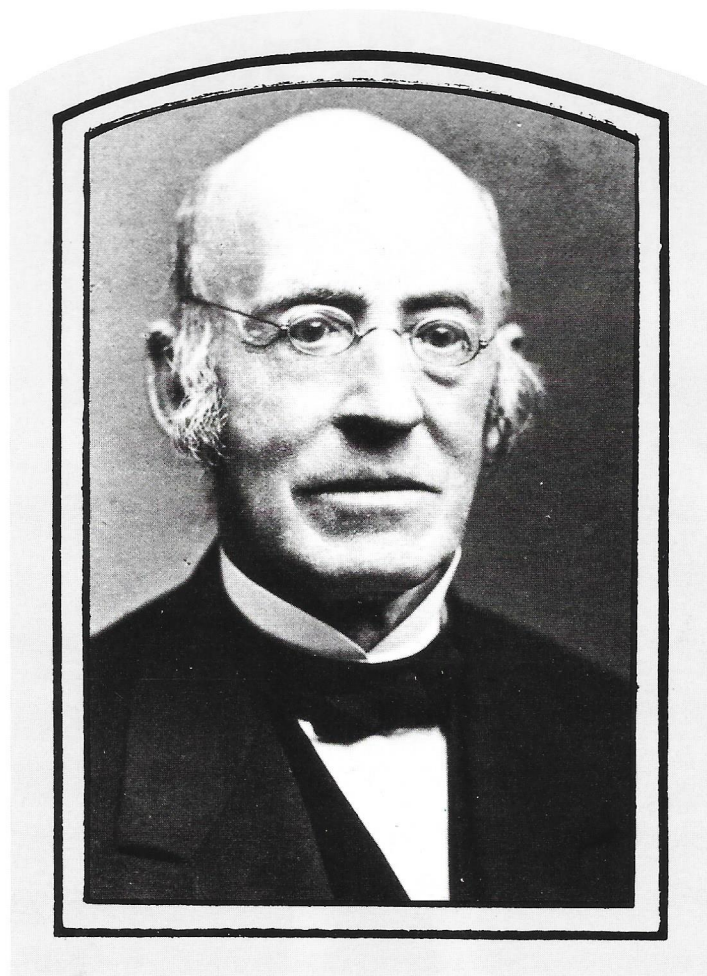
tioned the moral validity of the Society of Friends' position on slavery – doubts motivated by the theology of the religious body itself. The Quakers' social testimony on the equality of all human beings was a logical extension of the Society's most fundamental belief, the Inner Light Doctrine, which maintained that there is that of God in each person. Naturally, if God manifested his presence in each individual then, in His eyes, all human beings were of equal value, regardless of race, sex or creed. This conviction had been instrumental in William Penn's decision to allow non-Quakers to settle and participate in the life of his colony, as well as the decision of Society founder, George Fox, to allow women the right to minister to a congregation. However, the Friends, as a religious organization, could not bring themselves to a complete realization of their testimony on equality when their central body, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, was controlled by members whose affluence depended on slave labor and the slave trade. Still, there were those independent Quakers who became unyielding in their opposition to slavery within, as well as outside of, the Society of Friends.

As early as 1688, the Friends of Germantown Monthly Meeting, near Philadelphia, drafted the first anti-slavery petition in this country. These Friends argued that "there was a liberty of conscience [in America] which is right and reasonable, and there ought to be likewise a liberty of the body." Accordingly, it was the position of the Germantown Friends to "stand against" the practice of "bring[ing] men [to this country] or to rob and sell them against their will."

The Germantown petition was ignored by the monthly meetings to which it was referred. Individual Quakers began to denounce slavery, however, and attempted to persuade their meetings to

oppose the moral institution. The most noted of these early Quaker abolitionists was the compassionate John Woolman (1720-1772). The eldest son of a New Jersey farming family, Woolman left a rather successful retail business and devoted his life to preaching his anti-slavery beliefs throughout the American colonies. In 1754, he aroused the conscience of the

If, however, one should "exercise righteousness and loving-kindness towards all men" then there is "a good foundation to hope that the blessing of God will sweeten [his] treasures during this life and [his] memory [will] be savory when entered into rest." By addressing the corruption of the oppressors and the demoralization of the oppressed, Woolman



*William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), editor of the Liberator, the most influential abolitionist newspaper in the United States, was an impassioned speaker who asked Lucretia Mott to attend a meeting in Philadelphia in 1833 to organize the American Anti-Slavery Society.*

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting concerning the evils of slavery in his work, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*. In the tract Woolman appealed to the Christian sympathies of his readers by reminding them that "to deprive a fellow creature of the sweetness of freedom, one of the greatest temporal blessings, is a contradiction to true religion itself"

brought the issue of slavery to the forefront of the Yearly Meeting's concerns.

Although John Woolman has been considered the prototypical American Quaker for the nature of his anti-slavery activities, Pennsylvanians came to know two Quaker abolitionists who were no less effective in their fierce opposition to slavery. Benjamin Lay

(1677-1759), of course, represents the more drastic action taken by an early Quaker abolitionist in his attempt to purge the Society of Friends from the evils of slavery, but his nineteenth century successor, Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), was just as vigorous in her efforts to inspire a true equality of condition in a nation divided by Civil War. Although they lived in two different eras, maintained distinctly different objectives with regard to the abolitionist movement and employed contrasting methods, Benjamin Lay and Lucretia Mott were instrumental in the success of Pennsylvania's anti-slavery movement.

A progressive reformer for the eighteenth century, Benjamin Lay sought to purify the Religious Society of Friends by convincing Quakers of the evils of human bondage, which he witnessed, firsthand, as a young merchant. Born in Colchester, England, in 1677, to a family of Quakers, Lay left his native village in 1718 to travel to the West Indies, where as a tradesman, he was exposed to slavery, even submitting to its temptations. On one occasion Lay caught two of his personal slaves stealing from his store shelves. Enraged, he nearly beat them to death. This incident, together with his exposure to similar brutalities, left such a profound impact on the dwarfish Friend that he began to advise and support slaves with material goods. His benevolence was met with increasing hostility by other slave owners in Barbadoes who, by 1731, threatened his life if he did not leave the West Indies. Lay moved to the North American colonies in 1732, settling in present-day Abington township, ten miles northeast of Philadelphia.

Lay strongly believed that God had selected him as a vehicle to abolish slavery within the Society of Friends. He expected others to acknowledge this divine mission and follow his preaching. To this end, Lay tried to live an



exemplary life. Building a stone cottage that resembled a cave, Lay cultivated his own garden and fruit trees and spun his own wool for clothing. He was a self-sufficient vegetarian, refusing to eat food, wear clothing or use any article procured at the expense of animal life or slave labor. The eccentric Quaker devoted much of his time to meditation, reading from his two hundred volume library and writing tracts against the institution of slavery. One of these, *All Slave Keepers, Apostates*, drew the wrath of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Printed by his good friend Benjamin Franklin in 1737, Lay's pamphlet identified slavery as "a practice so gross and hurtful to religion beyond what words can set forth." The tract proceeded to denounce all slave-owners, particularly those "dear true and tender Friends, called Quakers," who served as the primary motivation "for publishing [his] book." Outraged by the pamphlet, John Kinsey, the clerk of the Yearly Meeting, published an advertisement in Franklin's widely-read *Pennsylvania Gazette* contending that Lay's argument contained "gross abuses against the whole Society of Friends." Kinsey disassociated the Yearly Meeting from any connection with Lay by maintaining that "the author was not of the religious community" and therefore, the Society was "not to be accountable for the book's contents." But if Lay's writings were not sufficiently provocative for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, his actions would surely prove to outrage.

Lay possessed little patience and refused to wait for Friends to reach consensus—that is, a general agreement that a collective decision reflected God's will—on the issue of slavery. His method was one of direct confrontation and he practiced it daily. Once he illustrated his testimony against the use of tea produced by slaves by standing outside of the Yearly Meeting

proceedings, then held at Second and High streets across from Philadelphia's market place, with a large box of china. After attracting the attention of a considerable gathering of curious spectators, he took out a hammer and began smashing the china, the shards scattering amidst the crowd.

His Quaker neighbors,

cern for his health, Lay reprimanded them bitterly. "You pretend compassion for me, yet do not feel for the slaves who are half-clad!" Eventually, the Abington Friends learned to ignore his remonstrations, accepting only the spirit in which they were offered. Perhaps the most telling episode in Lay's twenty-eight years of abolitionist activities occurred

the mother began looking for her child and stopped to question Lay. For a time he feigned ignorance and when satisfied by her anguish asked, "How do you think those poor mothers in Africa feel when their offspring are torn from them, never to be returned again?" The family freed their slaves.

Although Benjamin Lay's tactics, including direct confrontation, might have been too progressive, if not hostile, for the eighteenth century, his message to other Friends was clear: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." Nor were his attempts in vain as the week before the reformer's death, on February 3, 1759, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting revised its discipline policy making the selling or importing of slaves a cause for disownment. Upon learning of this revision Lay rejoiced, "Thanksgiving and praise be rendered unto the Lord God!" He solemnly added, "I can now die in peace." A subsequent revision in the Society's discipline also stands as a testimony to Lay's perseverance, for in 1776 the Yearly Meeting made it a cause for disownment among Friends to own slaves; Lay's objective had finally been achieved.

Unlike Benjamin Lay, Lucretia Mott was faced with the challenge of working toward the abolition of slavery in the larger society. It was no small coincidence that, in 1780, Quaker-influenced Pennsylvania became the first state in the new nation to abolish all slavery within its borders. The American South, however, continued to propagate the institution through its production of, and trade in, cotton, a commodity in great demand by the textile industries of the North and Great Britain. Although she was introduced to the anti-slavery movement by William Lloyd Garrison, the New England anti-slavery journalist, Lucretia Mott made her own significant contribution to the cause of Black emancipation.



*Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793-1880), after attending the convention called for the establishment of the American Anti-Slavery Society, became a staunch supporter of the abolitionist movement; before long her concern for the rights of slaves earned her the title of the "Black Man's Goddess."*

though more tolerant of his eccentricities than the Philadelphia Friends, were often put off by his preachings, many of which occurred at the Abington Friends meetinghouse. For example, one winter's Sunday, Lay stood outside the meetinghouse with one bare foot buried deep in a snow drift. When Friends stopped to express their con-

shortly before his death in 1759 when he abducted the child of a slave-owning neighbor.

Lay, who had a great fondness for children, was a favorite with the youth. As he frequently preached to his neighbors on the wickedness of stealing children from African parents, he decided to illustrate the fact by keeping one of the children and enter-



in 1793, Lucretia Coffin attended a Friends School in New York to which she returned to teach in 1811. In New York she met her husband, James Mott, and they moved to Philadelphia in 1820. While her husband pursued his business as a textile merchant, Lucretia became more involved in the Society of Friends, becoming a recorded minister at the age of twenty-eight. Between the births of her children, she taught school and, by the age of forty, had settled into a comfortable lifestyle devoting herself to her home and family of twelve. But this tranquil life was interrupted by the social chaos of the 1830s.

In 1833, William Lloyd Garrison convened a meeting in Philadelphia for the purpose of establishing an American Anti-Slavery Society. Women were excluded from participating in such political meetings, but Garrison invited his good friend Lucretia Mott to this meeting. When the convention began to draft its Anti-Slavery Constitution Mott found herself on her feet, time and again, proposing revisions to the document. Her insight, as well as her genuine concern for the emancipation of blacks, impressed many of the abolitionists who later titled her the "Black Man's Goddess." Although she was later admitted to the executive committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, Mott sought to create a similar organization limited to a female membership.

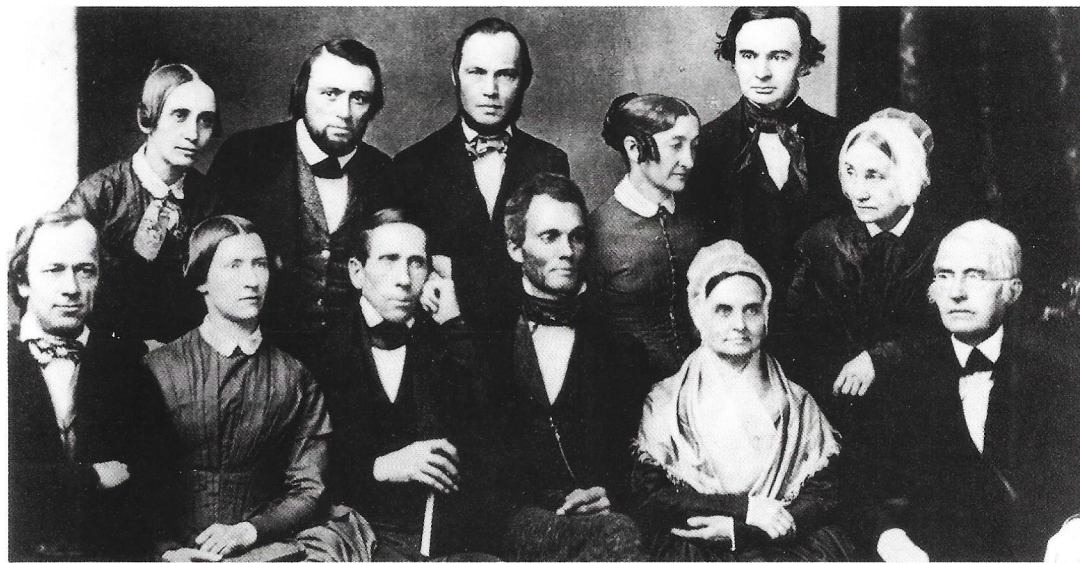
Mott immersed herself in the anti-slavery cause. A diminutive, gentle person, she came to life in her fervent emancipationist preaching. Initially, the Quaker matron, like most of her abolitionist friends, advocated colonization for Blacks, on the re-settlement of Black slaves in some other country outside the United States. However, as her involvement in the movement intensified, she became a fierce proponent of immediate emancipation and, subse-

quently, the same objectives of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society which she founded in 1838. What was truly unique about this group, though, was its genuine attempt to practice integration: its membership included both black and white females; it established schools for black children who were taught by white teachers; it created a vigilance committee to help escaping slaves and to warn free blacks of the approach of kidnappers; and it divided the city of Philadelphia into sections, assigning a member to

the proceedings of the second meeting of Philadelphia's Female Anti-Slavery Society on May 17, 1838. Held at Philadelphia's recently constructed Pennsylvania Hall, the meeting was interrupted by the cries of a violent mob which proceeded to set the building on fire. Afterward the mob began marching towards the Motts' house on Sansom Street. However, several abolitionist friends managed to distract the angry crowd's attention by shouting "On to the Motts!" and pointing in the wrong direction.

Such scenes resulted in an

reformers, Lucretia Mott drafted a "Declaration of Sentiments" modeled on the Declaration of Independence. The document opened with the premise that "all men and women are created equal" and it indicted men for "endeavoring in every way that he could to destroy [woman's] confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life." Through these activities Lucretia Mott began to discover the gentle but firm leadership style she possessed, and to develop confidence in her own



each in order to look after the needs of Blacks in that area. No other abolitionist society worked as intimately with Blacks as did Mott's organization.

Unfortunately for Philadelphia's first female abolitionist, her actions were too progressive for the tastes of nineteenth century society. Public sentiment in many northern cities went against the abolitionists who had permitted females to not only participate in the anti-slavery movement, but to voice their opinions in mixed gatherings. Even worse, the integration of Black and white women in an anti-slavery organization sent shock waves throughout the North; it was simply unacceptable for the period. These

*Lucretia Mott (seated, second from right) and her husband, James (seated, far right), were admitted to the Executive Committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, photographed in 1851. She also founded the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1838, which attempted to practice integration: its members included white and black women and its schools for black children were taught by white teachers.*

inevitable split in the anti-slavery movement between those who refused to mix the issues of slavery and womens' rights and those who supported both. When, in 1840, Lucretia Mott found herself barred from the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, she decided to dedicate herself to the broader principle of "equal rights" for women as well as for blacks. Her efforts resulted in the calling of a womens' rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in

vision on equal rights. More impressive, though, was that she continued to be a gifted minister of these issues, despite the fact that the Society of Friends castigated her for her abolitionist activities.

By the mid 1840s, the Religious Society of Friends was becoming increasingly cynical about the radical nature of the anti-slavery movement. The majority of Friends did not want to become involved and, to be certain, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting discouraged its



membership from participation. Quaker leaders rationalized that if Friends wanted to form anti-slavery societies, let them form strictly Quaker anti-slavery organizations, eliminating blacks or non-Friends from membership; it was with these non-Quakers that the trouble rested. Attempts were made to bar the issue of slavery from the Meeting service itself. Still, Lucretia Mott continued to speak out in Meeting against slavery and carried stacks of anti-slavery literature with her for distribution among the membership. She also continued her abolitionist activities along with

mitment to her religious convictions, particularly those on pacifism, during the Civil War period. She viewed the war as God's punishment of the nation for its moral abuses against the "rights and liberties of millions of unoffending fellow-beings." Although she did not participate in the war directly, the Quaker reformer did further its cause by establishing an Underground Railroad station and through her inspirational preaching.

Having moved to the Cheltenham area northeast of Philadelphia in 1857, the Motts built their own estate, "Roadside," where they aided in the

yard. The soldiers doffed their hats to the Quaker matron, who stood on her front porch, and shouted "Hurrah!" The war had ended. Later that night she would write to a close friend recounting the experience with ambivalence: "I felt for the poor fellows—in the hope that the war is over—and over in the right way." Lucretia Mott understood that though the battle for emancipation had been won, the social struggle for the equality of opportunity was just beginning.

Throughout the Reconstruction period, between 1865 and 1877, the Religious Society

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#### FOR FURTHER READING

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Formally opened with much ceremony on May 14, 1838, Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia was destroyed by a great mob three days later. Mayor John Swift attempted to calm the unruly crowd assembled to harass participants in the anti-slavery meetings taking place in the building, but rioters stormed the structure, heaping furniture and papers on the speaker's platform, igniting it before fifteen thousand people.

blacks, Presbyterians, Unitarians and anyone else, Quaker or non-Quaker, who shared her concern. Although the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting did not disown her for these actions, many Friends launched rumors about her relationship with Garrison and her "manipulation of the Anti-Slavery and Womens' Rights movements to enhance her personal economy."

Despite the ostracization by the Society of Friends, Lucretia Mott maintained a deep com-

escape of approximately four hundred fugitive slaves during a seven year period. Lucretia also visited the nearby camps used to train black troops for service in the Union Army. From her position atop a drum head, she encouraged the trainees to "do their duty as they saw fit," reminding them that "the time would come when war would be no more." Her wish came true on May 2, 1865, when the last regiment marched out of a neighboring camp and through her front

of Friends aided former slaves in adapting to freedom. Among its involvements was the establishment of schools for the education of black youth and employment agencies to find work at fair wages for freed men. In fact, the preservation of equal rights for black citizens became the overwhelming social concern of this religious organization that had originally approached emancipation with skepticism.

Essentially, the success of the Society of Friends was in large measure the success of individual members Benjamin Lay and Lucretia Mott, two Pennsylvania Quakers who had such a deep compassion for the plight of others that they challenged the social norms of their day—and won. ❖