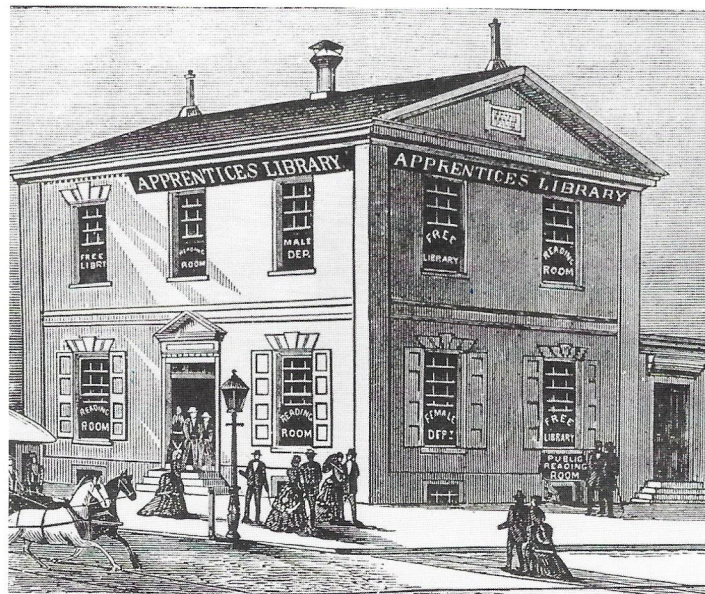
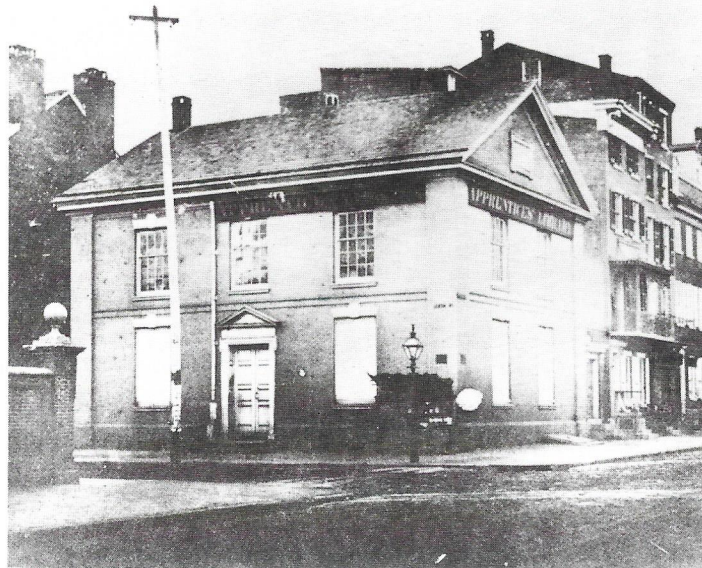


A Quaker testimony to the American Revolution

by William C. Kashatus III

On a cool, pleasant early autumn morning in the year 1834, John Price Wetherill made his way hastily down the vacant streets of Philadelphia towards the city's western edge. Most of the *respectable* people were already seated in their churches, listening to the angelic sound of a choir or the piercing exhortation of a minister. Little did Wetherill care on this Sunday morning about respectability. After all, he had descended from a long line of rebels. Instead, this Quaker was more concerned with the fact that he was late for what would prove to be the most important meeting of his lifetime. In the process, he had kept a fellow Quaker waiting, locked outside the small, plain brick meetinghouse at the corner of Fifth and Mulberry streets. As he approached the building Wetherill noticed, much to his relief, that Elizabeth Claypoole still awaited his arrival.

"Greetings Friend! How is thee on this fine First Day morning?" she inquired. Catching his breath, Wetherill managed an apology. "Elizabeth, I am sorry to have kept thee waiting. Please come, let us begin the meeting." Fumbling through his coat pockets, the anxious Quaker found the key and unlocked the door to the meetinghouse. The two Friends entered and took their seats on the facing benches. The Meeting for Worship had begun with a congregation of



Built in 1783, the Free Quaker Meetinghouse served Philadelphia's Society of Free Quakers until it disbanded in 1834. Located at Fifth and Mulberry streets, the structure witnessed the evolution of the Society, whose members included the city's leading residents — and dissidents. A photograph of 1868 (top) was followed by a woodcut in 1875 (bottom).

two. True to their rebellious nature, these two Quakers continued the practice of meeting in silent worship each Sunday for nearly a decade. It was difficult to believe that John Wetherill and Elizabeth Claypoole, better known as Betsy Ross, were the only surviving members of a religious body that, at one time, numbered more than two hundred and stirred some of the greatest controversy in the City of Philadelphia.

Known as the Free Quakers, they were disowned by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the main administrative body of the Society of Friends, for their participation in the Revolutionary War. Claiming to be "free from every species of ecclesiastical tyranny" and, therefore, more "respectful of the principles of the Early Friends," this splinter group formally established itself as an independent religious body in 1781. Their example, however, brought into question the neutral position maintained by most Quakers during the American Revolution.

As the two worshippers settled into silence, Wetherill sensed Elizabeth's uneasiness. He knew her well, well enough to understand that this gathering was more than a religious observance for Elizabeth Claypoole; it was, in a very real sense, a testimony to the labors of her life. Nevertheless, he could not begin to appreciate the sacrifice she had made over the years not only

spiritual existence of the Free Quaker Society. Wetherill's great-grandfather Samuel, the founder of the dissident group, had always spoken admiringly of her, the last of the revolutionary generation of Fighting Friends. Despite her fearless reputation, however, Elizabeth could not muster the courage to tell her fellow Quaker what he already knew: that she had decided to leave the city in order to spend the rest of her life with her children.

When the clock struck noon, Elizabeth Claypoole offered her hand to John Wetherill and, in doing so, she not only closed the Meeting for Worship but put an end to the Religious Society of Free Quakers.

The outbreak of the American Revolution in the 1770s presented a major dilemma for the Religious Society of Friends: Was it possible to balance an allegiance to the Commonwealth without deviating from the pacifist principles of the Society? Despite their withdrawal from the colonial assembly in 1756, the Friends—as founders of Pennsylvania and its constitution—still exercised considerable influence over the colony's political life and, naturally, had difficulty divorcing themselves from a strong commitment to their version of William Penn's Holy Experiment. At the same time, though, as professors of a testimony on peace in a time of war, the Friends found themselves floundering between competing loyalties. Complicating matters even more was the fact that the Society's discipline on the issue of non-compliance in military affairs had not been clearly defined in the past.

To be certain, there was a broad spectrum of compliance and non-compliance among Quakers during the Revolutionary War. While some Friends entertained pro-British sympathies and opposed the

country, the majority remained neutral, in strict observance of the Peace Testimony, and regardless of their political preferences. On the other hand, there were those Quakers who willingly affirmed allegiance to the revolutionary cause when Pennsylvania's legislature in 1777 demanded such an action as the price of full citizenship. Others actively supported the American effort by paying taxes, helping to collect reve-

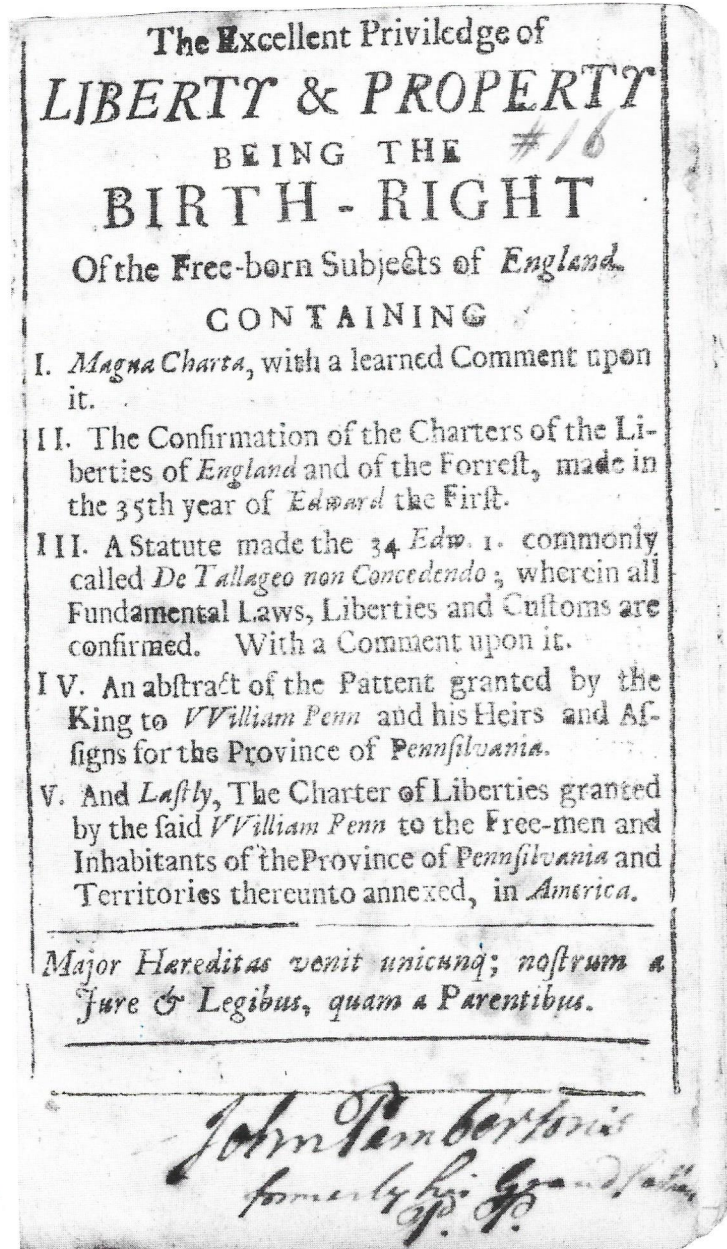
serving on committees for defense. There were still others who joined the Continental Army as a sign of their dedication to political freedom. These patriotic Friends inevitably bore the consequences for their actions as 1,276 members were disowned from the Society of Friends: 758 for military deviations, 239 for paying taxes and fines, 125 for subscribing loyalty tests, 69 for assisting the war effort, 32 for

including watching military drills and celebrating independence. Among these were many Free Quakers.

Little research has been done on the Free Quakers, but existing interpretations question the genuineness of the group's commitment to Quaker values. While some historians maintain that the Free Quaker "attachment to the general principles of the Society was sincere as they did not care to be unchurched and they wanted the simple unclerical worship of Friends," others identify the Free Quakers as "nominal Friends" who had "little interest in the maintenance of the Society's testimonies." An examination of the Free Quaker leadership, though, reveals that its most politically and religiously influential members believed their participation in the American Revolution to be consistent with early Quaker values and they sought to recapture the spirit of that earlier movement in their establishment of a Free Quaker body.

Instrumental in the founding of the Free Quaker Meeting were Samuel Wetherill, Elizabeth Claypoole, Christopher Marshall and Timothy Matlack. All four were known for their rebelliousness and for their active support of the revolutionary movement in Philadelphia. However, only Wetherill's disownment can be traced to his involvement in the cause. Although his compatriots were also engaged in rebel activities, they had been disowned by the Society of Friends prior to the outbreak of hostilities with Great Britain.

Samuel Wetherill, a recorded minister from the Fourth Street Monthly Meeting, descended from a long line of Quaker dissenters. His ancestors moved to Burlington, New Jersey, in 1688 after refusing "to refrain from



As founders of Pennsylvania and its constitution, the Quakers exerted great influence over the colony's religious and political life, and faced much difficulty in divorcing themselves from the tenets espoused by founder William Penn. A liberal thinker, Penn wrote *The Excellent Priviledge of Liberty and Property*, published in Philadelphia in 1687.

Yorkshire." John Price Wetherill inherited this rebellious spirit. As a Philadelphia weaver, and one of the managers of the United Company of Pennsylvania Manufacturers, he supported the non-importation agreement in 1765 in order to defeat the Stamp Act. When the Revolutionary War erupted, the Quaker minister's textile factory furnished the Continental Army with cloth for uniforms. Later, in 1779, Wetherill affirmed allegiance to Pennsylvania, thereby renouncing any loy-

ality to Great Britain. As a result, he was disowned by the Society for "deviating from the ancient testimony and peaceable principles by manifesting himself a party in the public commotions prevailing."

Wetherill's disownment was especially felt by the Fourth Street Meeting as he was "well respected among the membership." In fact, fellow Quaker Anthony Benezet attempted to save Wetherill from disownment by trying to convince him of his wrong-doing. Benezet hoped that the matter "would be easier to settle by a

tact acknowledgement of Wetherill's mistake." However, the plan failed and the minister went on to initiate the Free Quaker movement, serving as its recording clerk.

The disownments of Claypoole, Marshall and Matlack were much less reputable than that of Wetherill's. Elizabeth Claypoole, the legendary flagmaker, was disowned in 1774 "for marrying a person of another religious persuasion." The fact that she eloped with this, her first husband John Ross, was not only intolerable for Quakers but was consid-

ered immoral in the Protestant dominated society of Philadelphia. The Quaker seamstress lost her first and her second husband, John Ashburn (also a non-Friend), in the Revolutionary War. At the time she joined the Free Quakers, Elizabeth was married to an Episcopalian, John Claypoole, a lieutenant in the Pennsylvania militia. It would appear that this patriotic Friend had little regretted her separation from the Society of Friends, but was personally motivated to further the American war effort. Not only did Betsy Ross furnish the Continental Army with ammunition and uniforms, turning her house into a factory for that purpose, but she also provided the high command with intelligence reports on the British Army which occupied the City of Philadelphia during the winter of 1777-1778.

Christopher Marshall and Timothy Matlack, the most dissident of the Free Quakers, belonged to the radical wing of Philadelphia's revolutionary movement. Strongly opposed to the conservative leadership of John Dickinson and the Pennsylvania Assembly, the radical Whigs "resolved to replace the Assembly, including the constitution of the province—the whole regime—with a new, more liberal system." Both men commanded the political influence to achieve these goals. While they both served on the Council of Public Safety, Matlack held posts, at various times, as the clerk of the Continental Congress and as Secretary of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, a body which assumed the executive



One of the most dissident of the Free Quakers, Timothy Matlack was disowned by the Society of Friends in 1765 for, among other errors, "frequenting the wrong kind of company." A hedonist and insatiable pleasure-seeker, his penchant for gambling, particularly horse-racing and cock-fighting, was well known.

adoption of Pennsylvania's new constitution of 1776.

Although Marshall and Matlack maintained highly responsible offices, their ethical behavior was suspect. Marshall, who has been called a "profoundly religious individual," was disowned by the Society in 1751 for "associating with men suspected of engaging in counterfeiting and the passing of false currency." If this allegation was correct it would be easy to understand how Marshall was able to retire from his apothecary business a wealthy man by the time of the American Revolution. Matlack's conduct was even more infamous. Disowned by the Society of Friends in 1765 for "failing to pay the debts" incurred in his hardware business and for "frequenting the wrong kind of company," this Free Quaker's greatest claim to notoriety before the war was his insatiable penchant for gambling, horse-racing and the lower class sport of cock-fighting. His hedonistic attitudes, combined with his Whiggish politics, frequently earned him the wrath of the wealthier class. In fact, Matlack's tendency to offer his unsolicited political opinions resulted in a public fist fight in 1781, when he attempted to heckle one of the most affluent Philadelphians and a fierce opponent of the radicals, Whitehead Humphreys. The vengeful Humphreys, who received the worst end of the fight, wrote and distributed a poetic broadside which reflected some of the upper class contempt for Matlack.

"Altho' dear Tim you've rose so great,

Conservative leader of the Pennsylvania Assembly John Dickinson was threatened by the radical Whigs, including Timothy Matlack and Christopher Marshall, with a movement to "replace the Assembly, including the constitution of the province — the whole regime — with a new, more liberal system."

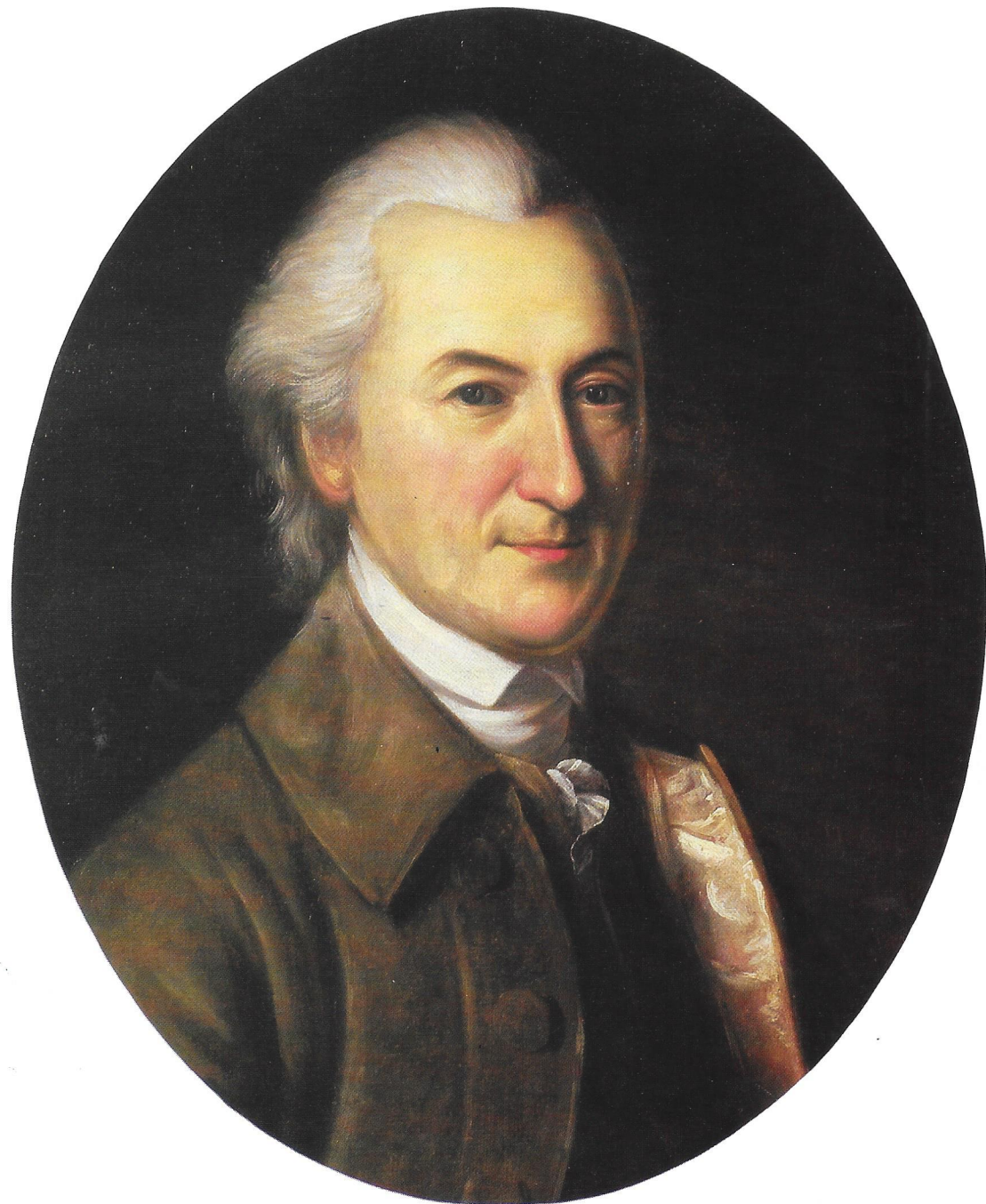
*state;
Yet to a brother, lend an ear,
A moment — tho' in humble
sphere...
Did you forget in days of yore
When you, like Price, was
wretched poor?
But all at once you've raised so
high,
Quakers can't safely pass you by!*

Essentially, the leaders of the Free Quaker movement would appear to be unconcerned with the religious discipline of the Society. Their compliance in the war effort may be construed as simply

lished pattern of deviant behavior, with Wetherill's case the exception. However, it would be misleading to dismiss these dissident Friends as irresponsible in their practice of Quakerism. In fact, the Free Quaker leaders could not only justify their behavior as consistent with the tenets of Quakerism, but believed their interpretation to be based on the spirit of the Early Friends.

For the Free Quakers, the practice of disownment itself contradicted the fundamental values of Quakerism. Samuel

"disowning necessarily implies exclusion from Heaven" and, according to "the ancient principles laid down by Robert Barclay," an early Quaker theologian, man is "accountable to the Lord only." The Free Quakers believed their separation was "forced upon (them) by the pride and folly of Meetings attempting to abridge the rights of conscience." Therefore, the discipline of the Free Quaker Meeting eliminated "all cause for disownment," rather if a Friend erred, the Meeting "must labor to restore him."



involvement in civil and military matters was viewed as moral obligation by the Free Quakers. Upon hearing of his disownment from the Society of Friends, Wetherill exclaimed: "We Friends should be as watchman on the wall as there is something due from us to the cause of independence as well as to the Lord." Matlack, who served in the Continental Army at the battle of Princeton, agreed, viewing all governments as "essentially a defensive war for the protection of public peace," and when threatened by domestic treason or foreign invasion, "it then becomes the plain duty of every man to join in the public defense by all means possible." If war was the consequence, participation "in such instances is not merely justifiable but right and proper." Similarly, Christopher Marshall was firmly convinced of the righteousness of his ethical position as a participant in the revolutionary movement. His confidence was reinforced by the fact that "many of the stiff Quakers who maintained the testimony on peace were ashamed of their position since the engagement in New England," such as the battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775. In other words, the Free Quakers had every intention of paying "regard to the principles of Quaker forefathers and to their rules" – but only insofar as "they applied to (their) own circumstances." Participation in the Revolutionary War, then, was a matter dictated by the leading of one's own Inner Light or moral conscience. To ignore that leading, as the Society was doing with its Testimony on Peace, was to ignore the fundamental doctrine of Quakerism itself. Naturally, the Free Quakers encouraged freedom of conscience and action in their attempt to respect the leading of the Inner Light.

Basically, the aim of the Free Quaker movement was to

revive the spirit of the Early Friends but to do so by adapting that spirit to the changing circumstance of time. In this sense, the Free Quaker leadership was very devout in their profession of faith. They acknowledged their "dependence upon a Supreme Being and the duty of public worship owed to Him"; they admittedly had "no new doctrine to teach, nor any design of promoting a schism among Friends"; and they lamented the "loss of

those advantages which arose from religious communion" with the larger Society of Friends, fearing a greater loss "to children and families." Simply put, the Free Quakers viewed themselves as *genuine* Quakers.

Like the Early Friends, the Free Quakers demonstrated an evangelical spirit. Christopher Marshall, whose politics were strongly laced with the millennial spirit of the earlier movement, frequently accused the

wealthy Philadelphia Quakers of "covetousness, grasping, worldliness, extreme pride, loftiness and luxury," and believed that some were advocates of a British government that was "inspired by the Prince of Darkness." Their intention, he claimed, was the "destruction of the liberties and freedom of this new world," subjecting it to "papal power." In their hope to convince others of these ideas – as well as to promote the righteousness of their movement and to increase their membership – Timothy Matlack and Samuel Wetherill made missionary efforts to New England, where they had hoped to achieve a fellowship with the like-minded separatist Friends of Dartmouth Monthly Meeting in Massachusetts. Not only was this attempt at proselytizing reminiscent of the self-righteousness of the Early Friends, but it was also conducted in the same biblical tone.

We are weak now having been scattered abroad and lived solitary from our kindred...yet we feel that fraternal affection toward you which causes Esau to weep on the neck of Jacob and Jacob to weep on the neck of Esau. We feel ourselves your bretheren.

We cherish a hope that there may be found among you, young men, undismayed by the chariot of fire who may have caught hold on the mantle of Elijah and drawn down a double portion of the spirit of the Great prophet upon them...We hope that you will adopt the name Free Quakers so we might be outwardly one people in name and practice.

When the Philadelphia Yearly meeting criticized the Free Quakers for their evangelizing, Samuel Wetherill reminded that body of "the liberty which their forefathers took in going into the place of worship of other societies and speaking among them." He accused the Society of Friends of hypocrisy, as it would have



The Free Quaker Meetinghouse, now an important visitors attraction in Philadelphia, was photographed in 1917 for insurance documentation (top). The structure still stands on Independence Mall (bottom) and serves as silent testimony to the Quaker contribution to the American Revolution – and the nation as well.

Early Friends but refused to recognize "the duty of a person of another society to come and preach to Friends." Relations between the two bodies continued to deteriorate. Philadelphia Yearly refused to permit the Free Quakers the use of a meetinghouse for worship or the right of burial on property under the care of the Society. Having made these appeals, with little success, Wetherill and the others began to gather for silent worship at his own residence. Finally, in 1782, Wetherill purchased a lot at Fifth and Mulberry (presently Arch) streets for the construction of a Free Quaker meetinghouse. When completed in 1783, a stone was placed high in the northern gable with an inscription which testifies not only to the Free Quakers' pride in the new nation, which had been proclaimed in 1776, but also to their uncertainty about the form of government actually existing at that time under the Articles of Confederation.

The first Meeting for Worship was held in the Free Quaker meetinghouse on June 13, 1784, with two hundred attending. Thereafter, the usual attendance fluctuated between thirty and fifty. Although the Free Quaker movement attempt to broaden its fellowship with the dissident New England Friends failed, its leadership continued to improve the spiritual life of its Philadelphia-based membership. During the 1780s and 1790s, Elizabeth Claypoole and Timothy Matlack headed a committee which implemented a Bible study program among Free Quakers. These "weighty," or more respected Friends, also began the practice of reading the discipline of the Free Quaker Society each Sunday after Meeting for Worship. These efforts were made out of a genuine interest to retain the spirit and structure of the earliest Friends meetings.

Quaker movement, however, rests with the challenge it presented to the larger Society of Friends. This splinter group forced the Society to come to terms with their identity as a truly *Quaker* body. By taking the fundamental doctrine of the Early Friends—the Inner Light—and pitting it against a secondary testimony on peace, the Free Quakers illustrated the blatant contradiction of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in

over personal experience, the very basis upon which George Fox had founded the Quaker religion.

The Society of Free Quakers would survive until 1834 when declining membership compelled the group to disband as a religious body. However, the organization was continued, by the descendants of the original members, as a philanthropic committee to distribute funds that had been left to the

philanthropic organization still exists today, headed by Reeves Wetherill, the great-great-great grandson of the founder, Samuel Wetherill. The organization's work, as well as its meetinghouse, which still stands on Independence Mall, serves as silent testimony to the Quaker contribution to the American Revolution. ❖

William C. Kashatus III, Philadelphia, is a regular contributor to this magazine; his most recent article, "Proclaim Liberty Throughout all the Land," appeared in the winter 1990 edition. A teacher at Episcopal Academy, he has been employed by the National Park Service at Independence National Historical Park and at Valley Forge National Historical Park. His articles have appeared in numerous publications. He received his bachelor of arts degree from Earlham College and his master of arts degree from Brown University in 1984.

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From the Monthly Meeting of FRIENDS,

Called by Some

The FREE QUAKERS,

Held by Adjournment at Philadelphia, on the 9th Day of the 7th Month, 1781.

To those of our Brethren who have disowned us.

BRETHREN,

AMONG the very great number of persons whom you have disowned for matters religious and civil, a number have felt a necessity of uniting together for the discharge of those religious duties, which we undoubtedly owe to God and to one another. We have accordingly met and having seriously considered our situation, agreed to establish and endeavour to support, on the ancient and pure foundation, meetings for public worship, and meetings for conducting our religious affairs. And we rejoice in a firm hope, that as we humble ourselves before God, his presence will be found in them, and his blessing defend and aid us, and declared that you have no unity with us, you have compelled us, however unwillingly, to become separate from you. And we are free to declare to you and to the world, that we are not desirous of having any mistake which we may happen to make laid to your charge, neither are we willing to have any of your errors brought as guilt against us. To avoid these, seeing that you have made the separation, we submit to have a plain line of distinction drawn between us and you. But there are some points which seem to require a comparison of sentiment between you and us, and some kind of decision to be made upon them. The property of that society of which we and you were once joint members, is far from being inconsiderable, and we have done nothing which can afford even a pretension of our having forfeited our right therein.

Whether you have or have not a right to declare to the world your sentiments of the conduct of any individual: Or whether you have or have not a right to fit in judgment over and pass sentence upon your christian brethren differing in sentiment from you, although educated among you, are not questions now to be considered: But you having taken upon you to do those things, it remains only to be enquired, What are the consequences in law and equity of your having so done. Surely you will not pretend that *our right* is destroyed by *their acts of yours*. But we fuggell to your consideration, Whether your conduct has or has not, in law, disqualified you to hold any part of that property? A serious and full consideration of this question, and the critical and strikingly singular situation in which you stand, cannot injure you; but it may, possibly, induce you to consider, with the more candour and readiness, what equity requires to be done by you toward us, or by us toward you. And tend to a decision the most proper between brethren, differing in sentiment one from another concerning their respective rights to property, yet each believing in him whose precept leads us to "do unto others as we would they should do unto us."

Whatever may have been the consequences to yourselves, either of your conduct toward us as friends to the present revolution; or of your conduct in other cases, left immediately respecting us, it seems to be unquestionably certain, that we have not done any thing which can possibly forfeit *our right*. And we see no reason why we should surrender it up to you; but think it a duty incumbent on us to assert our claim.

As a place for holding our meetings for worship, and meetings for business relative to the society is become necessary for us, since you have separated yourselves from us, by testifying against us, and thereby rendering it highly improper for us to appear among you, as one people, at your meetings, we think it proper for us to use, apart from you, one of the houses built by friends in this city for those purposes. We are desirous of doing this in the most decent and unexceptionable manner, and are willing to hear any thing which you may choose to say on the subject: And, therefore, we thus invite you to the opportunity of doing it, and of shewing what degree of kindness and brotherly love toward us, still remains among you. We also mean to use the burial ground, whenever the occasion shall require it: For, however the living may contend, surely the dead may lie peaceably together.

Let any may inter too much from this representation, we think it proper explicitly to declare, that should our right to the property in question be found, in the law, to be superior to yours, from any consideration whatever, it is far, very far from our wish to exclude you from a joint participation with us in the use of it: Neither do we mean to solicit a decision in law, unless you by your conduct compel us to it.

We sincerely and earnestly desire to have this subject amicably, equitably and speedily adjusted, and request that this free communication of our sentiments may be made known to all who are usually consulted on business among you, and that, for this purpose, it may be read when you next meet together on religious business.

As Christians, labouring in some degree to forgive injuries, we salute you, and, though disowned and rejected by you, we are your friends and brethren.

Signed by and in behalf of the subscribers,
SAMUEL WETHERILL, JR. Clerk.

The 1781 broadside explained the motive for the creation of the Society of Free Quakers, whose entire membership supported the cause of independence and took active roles in the American Revolution. The broadside was signed by Samuel Wetherill, a dissident, vocal and ardent member of the Free Quakers.