

Quaker = abolitionist?

By William C. Kashatus

The first antislavery petition in North America was drafted 325 years ago by the Quakers of Germantown Meeting. Urging their brethren to “stand against the practice of bringing slaves to this country, or selling them against their own will,” the Germantown Friends became pioneers of the antislavery movement. Their act also inspired a popular myth that all Quakers were abolitionists who welcomed former slaves into their religious body.

As a Quaker historian I have mixed feelings about this interpretation. I joined the Religious Society of Friends because of my great admiration for those Quakers who “spoke truth to power” in challenging the social injustices of their day. At the same time, I realize that Quakers, like all religious bodies, are imperfect. Most often, social change is the result of individual persistence that eventually mobilizes others to act. That fact is often lost in the popular perception of an historical event.

Historical memory is a tricky thing. Though history is necessarily written from the documentary evidence we have of the past, rarely is that evidence preserved without intent, nor is it always conveyed accurately. Instead, we tend to manipulate events to reaffirm prevailing myths. The tendency to make *Quaker* synonymous with *abolitionist* reflects the best and worst of this phenomenon.

To be sure, Quakers were pioneers in the antislavery movement. Those who opposed slavery were acting on the Friends’ fundamental belief of a divine light in every human being, reasoning that if God manifested His presence in each individual, then, in His eyes, all humans were of equal value, regardless of race. But that doesn’t mean

that all Friends accepted the contradiction between the Society’s belief in equality and slavery.

In fact, the so-called “Germantown Petition,” drafted on Feb. 18, 1688, was purposely ignored by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the governing body of Friends in Pennsylvania, when it was forwarded for approval. Realizing that the abolition of slavery would have an adverse impact on their personal wealth, the Quaker slaveholders who controlled the yearly meeting filed away the petition.

Not until 1758, after constant pressure from individual Friends like Anthony Benezet, Benjamin Lay, and John Woolman, did Philadelphia Yearly Meeting forbid members to continue any involvement in the slave trade.

Individual Friends continued to pressure the yearly meeting to make slaveholding itself a cause for disownment, and finally prevailed in 1776. Even then, the action was motivated primarily by the desire to cleanse Philadelphia Quakerdom of the evils of slavery, not to encourage racial equality within their religious body.

This fact is reinforced by the records of constituent monthly meetings, which reveal the conspicuous absence of African American members and, in some cases, overt discouragement of admitting blacks to membership. Thus, after 1776, abolitionism was not as pressing a concern for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting as it had been earlier.

Still, individual Friends shifted the antislavery campaign to the larger, non-Quaker society. Thomas Garrett of Wilmington appealed to the moral conscience of those who held slaves, refusing to purchase goods procured by slave labor, and opened his home as a station on the Underground Railroad. Lucretia Mott established Philadelphia’s Fe-

male Anti-Slavery Society, which raised funds for the cause and elevated public awareness through the publication of newspapers and pamphlets. Still others, like John Greenleaf Whittier, lobbied state and federal governments to adopt antislavery legislation.

At the same time, individual Friends did not always agree on the best approach to abolitionism. Some advocated a gradual approach, followed by the colonization of former slaves in Africa. Others demanded immediate emancipation and the complete integration of former slaves into white mainstream society. Naturally, there were also those who held positions that ran the gamut between these two extremes.

The point is: Not every Quaker was an abolitionist, and the minority who were certainly did not reach consensus on how to achieve emancipation. Without joining together with other non-Quaker abolitionists, both white and black, these Friends probably would have been unsuccessful in their fight against slavery.

Philadelphia’s early Quakers were seekers after truth; not saints. If we revere the minority of abolitionists among them, we should do so for their genuine effort to push the moral conventions of their time past the limits that justified slavery.

If, on the other hand, we fault the majority of Friends for their failure in not acting sooner or not acting at all, we should at least acknowledge that they were products of an earlier time that condoned slavery.

After that is done, if the Quakers seem so disappointingly human, so much like ourselves, it’s only because they actually were.

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