

Quakers: More than bit part

By William C. Kashatus

Tom Paine, Philadelphia's most impetuous radical, once snapped: "Quakers are like antiquated virgins. They see not the havoc deformity has made upon them, but pleasantly mistaking wrinkles for dimples, conceive themselves yet lovely and wonder at the stupid world for not admiring them."

Paine, a fallen Quaker himself, was incensed by the Friends' refusal to fight because of a spiritual commitment to pacifism. He sought revenge by promoting what became a popular myth — that Philadelphia Quakers were a self-centered and cowardly bunch who apologized for their neighbors' patriotism rather than embrace it.

It is a myth that continues to color visitors' understanding of Philadelphia's Quaker history today.

Having interpreted the history of early Philadelphia for many summers, I respect the mission of National Park Service and most of the interpretation done within the park's boundaries. At the same time, I have become disappointed in the remarkable naivete of fellow park rangers about Quaker faith, history and practice.

At a time when Independence Park is poised to implement the General Management Plan adopted last year, park officials should put Quakers back into Philadelphia history and do so responsibly.

Since the 1976 Bicentennial celebration, the park has emphasized three themes in telling the story of Philadelphia: the contributions of Benjamin Franklin to the colonial city, the events leading to American independence, and the city's decade as the capital of the early republic. In each theme, Quaker involvement is either conspicuously absent or misinterpreted.

While the new plan calls for the integration of Quaker history, several misconceptions still need to be addressed:

• **Myth:** Benjamin Franklin was Philadelphia's most prominent Quaker. Though Franklin was many things — founding father, world-renowned scientist, *philanderer extraor-*

dinaire — he certainly was no Quaker! He objected to the pacifist Quakers' refusal to establish a colonial militia. His manners, lifestyle and prose were much too urbane, much too fashionable, much too worldly for the taste of most Friends. In fact, Franklin was *not* an active member of any church, though he was careful for business reasons to remain on good terms with all of them.

• **Myth:** Quakers refused to support the patriot cause because they were Tories, loyal to the British Crown. While some Quakers may have entertained British sympathies early in the war, few, if any, acted on behalf of the redcoat army, even after



BARRIE MAGUIRE

the British occupation of Philadelphia. In fact, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the governing body of Friends, clearly stated in 1776 the Quaker position as one of unconditional neutrality. Quakers were forbidden to participate in the new civil government; to pay any fine, penalty or tax in lieu of military service, and to involve themselves in any business likely to promote war. While the majority of Quakers did remain neutral, some Friends willingly affirmed allegiance to the patriot cause when the Pennsylvania legislature, in 1777, demanded such an oath as the price of full citizenship. Others actively supported the American war effort by paying taxes, helping to collect revenues to finance the war, and serving on committees for defense. Still others joined the Continental Army and fought for American independence.

But the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting made these Friends accountable for their actions by disowning them.

• **Myth:** After the American Revolution, Quakers were alienated from their non-Quaker neighbors and lost the tremendous influence they had once exercised in Philadelphia. Although Quakers removed themselves from political power after the American Revolution, they continued to engage in business and contribute to the economic prosperity of the city. Friends also devoted themselves to an array of humanitarian issues — including abolitionism, charity schooling and prison reform. So extensive were their activities that President George Washington acknowledged that "there was no denomination among us who are more exemplary and useful citizens."

These kinds of misconceptions can be corrected if the National Park Service does a better job in training summer seasonal interpreters and makes better use of two sites within the park's boundaries.

The Free Quaker Meeting House, on the corner of Fifth and Arch Streets, can serve to tell the story of Quakers and the American Revolution, but only if it is staffed by informed interpreters.

Additionally, the park service should encourage visitors to begin tours at the Arch Street Meeting House, at Fourth and Arch Streets. This is a necessary "first step" to understand the Quaker founding of Philadelphia and the important contributions Friends have made to the cultural life of the city. At the very least, the park service should place this meeting house on the map distributed to visitors, as it has already done with sites such as Christ Church and St. Joseph's Church.

Quakers played a critical role in the founding of this city, state and nation. Any responsible interpretation of that history must begin by acknowledging that role. If not, we are as guilty as Tom Paine, who deluded himself into believing that admiration was more important to Friends than accuracy.

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