

9 A BRIEF HISTORY OF FRIENDS IN NEW ENGLAND

THE EARLY YEARS

Dissenters Among New England settlers

The first New England Quakers were New Englanders before they became Quakers. Most of them, or their parents, arrived from England in the great Puritan migration of the 1630s. Some sought new opportunities for profit and prosperity. Most had sufficient means to establish successful farms or mercantile ventures. Some came primarily for religious reasons, seeking relief from the strictness of the Church of England.

But the political and religious leaders in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay left little space for dissenting opinions. A number of settlers, including many who would later become Quaker, found themselves at odds with the authorities. By 1640 Massachusetts Bay authorities had expelled a number of dissidents, including Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. Both leaders settled in Rhode Island with some of their followers, helping set a tone of religious toleration there.

These banishments did not eliminate dissent. By the early 1650s, court records in communities north and south of Boston showed a number of residents fined for not attending church services, holding unauthorized worship in homes, and refusing to pay the tax to support the town minister.

The Publishers of Truth in England

Into this ferment came a handful of evangelists from a new movement in England. They called themselves “Children of the Light,” “Publishers of Truth,” or “the people of God.” They also called one other “Friends,” both personally and generally, decades later coming to name themselves the Religious Society of Friends.

Their enemies called them “Quakers” because they claimed to tremble before God. They preached that each person could know, directly and immediately, the power of Christ’s love and the light of his Truth, and could receive the power to conform their lives to the rigorous demands of that Light.

One leader in this new movement, George Fox, had searched without success for a priest or preacher who could satisfy his spiritual hunger. In 1647 he wrote, “I heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,’ and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.” He began an itinerant ministry, proclaiming from hilltops and in churches and market squares that “Christ has come to teach his people himself.” From the top of Pendle Hill in Lancashire Fox had a vision of “a great people to be gathered.”

The charismatic preaching of Fox and other members of the “Valiant Sixty,” as the core leaders of this nascent movement were called, attracted thousands of seekers, especially in the north of England. These communities found that if they gathered for worship “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24), God’s transforming power would be poured out upon them (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2). They experienced God’s presence, sometimes called the Light, as a power that searched their hearts, broke them open, and left them, in Margaret Fell’s words, “naked and bare before the Lord God, from whom you cannot hide yourselves.” That same Light transformed them, its power overcoming all that was contrary to itself. It knit them into one body; as Francis Howgill put it, “The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net.”

Quakers taught that this direct experience of grace was potentially available to everyone. That universalism distinguished them from many other Protestants, who taught that only some people could be saved. Quakers also witnessed to their experience that God could choose and use anyone as a messenger, including servants, uneducated laborers, and women.

The primary qualification for becoming a minister was faithfulness to God's direction. Formal theological training and institutional credentialing were unnecessary, and might even hinder the fresh proclamation of a living gospel.

These Publishers of Truth preached a prophetic message. Like the Hebrew prophets and Christian apostles, they experienced God as a living, energizing power, spurring them to confront what they saw as the hypocrisy and corruption of social and ecclesiastical institutions and to form communities of believers committed to doing God's will. They encouraged mutual aid, particularly to those who suffered persecution for their faithfulness.

They saw their movement as "primitive Christianity revived," and looked to the early Christian Church as their model for dynamic organization and loving community. The Bible shaped and guided every decision, though Friends viewed it as a record of God's action in the human community, not as the Word of God. The true Word of God was the living Christ, alive and active to the present day in the human heart (John 1:1-5).

As other Protestant churches battled over the proper practice and theology of the sacraments, Friends rejected the outward sacraments entirely as neither Biblically mandated, nor necessary, nor sufficient for salvation. They emphasized, from their own lived experience, Christ's promise to plant a new life in the soul and abide there to give it light, to feed it with the bread of life and the Living Water, and to lead it into all truth. They proclaimed their experience of a true baptism of Christ Himself, who baptizes His people with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Acts 2:4), and a true communion in the spiritual experience of the soul united with God in a gathered community.

Friends expected inward transformation or conviction to show itself in a life of holiness or moral perfection. Their understanding of perfection quickly took specific forms, which would come to characterize Quakers as a sect. Their experience showed them that God works within persons of every class. Addressing

upper-class individuals by the plural “you” suggested higher social class and denoted higher worth, so Friends insisted on using the singular “thee” and “thou” to everyone, and refused to bow or remove their hats before judges and other upper-class individuals. Swearing oaths implied a double standard of truth and violated Christ’s express commandment not to swear, so Friends refused all oaths, resulting in thousands of fines, imprisonments, and seizures of goods. They believed the state-supported church was corrupt, so they refused to attend it or to pay the tithes that supported it, resulting in more seizures.

Although formal membership records would not be kept for some decades, Margaret Fell and her daughters at their Swarthmoor Hall home in Lancashire kept track of those in prison or otherwise suffering for their testimony to Truth, and coordinated both material relief and lobbying efforts to secure their release. Although the movement attracted seekers from the Puritan army, many Friends became convinced that their Divine Guide would never order them to fight with outward weapons, even on behalf of a nominally Christian government.

These “Publishers of Truth” felt called to spread their message widely. “Let all nations hear the word,” Fox exhorted. “Spare no place, spare not tongue nor pen; but be obedient to the Lord God ... and be valiant for the Truth upon earth.” The movement spread quickly from the northern counties to London and the south, west into Ireland, and into Holland, Germany, and France.

QUAKER BEGINNINGS IN NEW ENGLAND, 1656–1676

In 1656 Ann Austin, a middle-aged matron, and Mary Fisher, a young servant-girl, left the north of England to carry the gospel to the English colonies. When they arrived in Boston, they were arrested and strip-searched for marks of witchcraft. After five weeks in jail, they were shipped back to Barbados. The next summer, in 1657, a group of English Quakers crossed the Atlantic in the *Woodhouse*, a small leaky ship guided, its skipper reported,

only by “the Lord leading our vessel even as it were a man leading a horse by the head.” They landed on Long Island, and some of them headed east to Rhode Island.

These evangelists found fertile ground in clusters of dissenters and seekers in Salem, Sandwich, and Pembroke, Massachusetts, and on Aquidneck (Rhode) Island, where Ann Hutchinson’s followers had settled. Rhode Island colony allowed the new groups to worship as they liked. Massachusetts Bay authorities, by contrast, viewed the Quaker proselytizers as scandalous heretics and a dangerous threat to public order. They arrested and fined residents for attending Quaker worship, burned Quaker books, and swiftly arrested and punished any Quaker who defied their decrees by setting foot in Boston.

Whippings, having ears cut off, and banishment only increased the resolve of the growing Quaker community to show the Puritans that God’s will could not be denied. As Wenlock Christison warned his Puritan persecutors, “Do not think to weary out the living God by taking away the lives of his servants.” Two English Friends—William Robinson and Marmaduke Stevenson—were hanged in Boston in 1659. Mary Dyer of Rhode Island was reprieved and banished, but returned to Boston in 1660, when she too was hanged. William Leddra was hanged in March 1661. After much lobbying by Friends in England, the newly restored king, Charles II, ordered an end to the Massachusetts persecutions. More than a dozen Quakers were released from the Boston jail in June 1661 and cart-whipped across the Rhode Island border, where they joined Friends from throughout the region for a General Meeting that New England Yearly Meeting claims as its first annual session.

Rhode Island, whose 1664 royal charter guaranteed religious liberty, quickly became a base for Quaker missions to other parts of New England. The neighboring colonies tried unsuccessfully to persuade Rhode Island to rid itself of these “notorious heretics.” Over the next decades, as English settlers spread throughout New England, Quaker meetings multiplied in Rhode Island, in south-

eastern Massachusetts and Cape Cod, and north from Salem to Dover, Berwick, and Kittery. New England meetings were visited regularly by ministers such as Elizabeth Hooton, one of the earliest and most stalwart ministers. Relying on a royal grant, Hooton persevered through multiple banishments to secure a meeting place for Boston Friends.

George Fox Visits New England

In 1671, fifteen years after the first Quakers arrived in New England, George Fox visited Friends throughout the American colonies, from the Caribbean northward. He and his traveling companions sought to strengthen meetings and resolve disputes and factions. He also promoted an institutional framework that he believed would enable the growing and dispersed Quaker community to survive and thrive.

After twenty years and often intense persecution, Fox and other Quaker leaders recognized that the movement needed a degree of order and discipline. Friends' emphasis on individual experience and discernment of God's call inherently contained the risk of "Ranterism" or anarchy. Friends insisted that God's Truth was always the same. But inevitably, it seemed, disagreements arose in discerning and interpreting that Truth. After several major disputes among English Friends, a weekly London meeting of recognized ministers began coordinating ministry and strategy, and both local and national groups took steps to disown or testify against those who might call themselves Friends but whose behavior was unacceptable to the bulk of the community.

Fox's recommended structure was similar to that adopted by Presbyterian churches. Friends from one or more worshipping groups were to gather for a monthly meeting for business, under divine guidance, for the "well-ordering and managing" of their practical affairs. Fox insisted that women, who had little voice in other churches, should have their own business meetings. Each monthly meeting was accountable to a quarterly regional meeting, and these in turn to the New England-wide Yearly

Meeting. All the Yearly Meetings reported to that in London, which throughout the colonial era maintained a central role. This structure helped the charismatic and prophetic movement evolve—not without controversy—into an orderly, disciplined, and respectable religious society.

Fox arrived in Rhode Island in late May 1672. Friends and non-Friends alike came from all corners of New England to hear this charismatic preacher. Roger Williams, the aged founder of the Providence Plantation, sought to debate with Fox directly, but the two never met. In meeting after meeting, some disrupted by hecklers, Fox demonstrated how God’s power could bring the body into spiritual unity. At the close of the General Meeting in Newport, Rhode Island, in June 1672 Fox wrote, “it was hard for Friends to part, for the glorious power of the Lord which was over all and his blessed Truth and life flowing amongst them had so knit and united them together that they spent two days in taking leave of one another, and Friends went away being mightily filled with the presence and power of the Lord.”

King Philip’s War

In 1676 southern New England was shaken by a devastating war between English settlers and some of the indigenous peoples, following decades of disputes over land usage. A handful of Friends tried without success to negotiate a resolution. Indians and English killed each other’s soldiers and non-combatants alike, burned houses and villages, and took captives. Quakers in the affected area did not object forcibly to the war, nor were they spared its effects. The war solidified English domination of the region, opening new areas to English settlement.

EXPANSION AND CONSOLIDATION, 1676–1750

As English settlements expanded up the coast into Maine, inland, and through southern Rhode Island, new meetings formed. They were nourished by local ministers and elders, a steady flow of

itinerant ministers, and the regular exchange of epistles (letters) among men's and women's meetings in England, Ireland, and the colonies. The Great Meetinghouse in Newport, Rhode Island, built in 1699, housed the Yearly Meeting's annual sessions each summer. The Yearly Meeting over this period formulated policies and procedures for membership, marriage, care for poor Friends, resolving disputes, and disownment.

During this period a "Quietist" spirit dominated Friends' worship. Friends were less concerned with evangelism or making converts than with preserving good internal order. Quaker ministers stressed introspection, silent waiting, obedience to the Divine, and avoidance of "creaturely activity" or actions based purely in human will or desire.

At the same time, Friends shared in the economic and geographical expansion of the English colonies. As farmers, ship-owners, merchants, and artisans, they prospered from the growing Atlantic trade in foodstuffs, lumber, whale oil, sugar and molasses, and rum. Quaker shopkeepers and merchants became particularly known for their fixed prices and honest dealings.

Some Friends used indentured labor; some bought and held native people or Africans in a state of slavery. A few participated directly in the slave trade. Through the early decades of the 1700s, a few Friends spoke of their sense that buying, selling, and even holding slaves were actions inconsistent with Truth. But some who spoke out forcefully on this question found themselves silenced or disowned for disrupting the unity of the meeting. Some individuals decided to free their enslaved Africans, or to refrain from buying slaves or using slave labor. In 1715–18 several monthly meetings brought the question to the Yearly Meeting, but Friends could not agree and put the question aside.

New England Quakers continued to suffer civil penalties as a result of how they lived out their moral and spiritual convictions. In Massachusetts and Connecticut, Friends were regularly subjected to fines and seizures of goods for refusing to pay taxes to

support Puritan ministers, for refusing to swear oaths, and for marriages not recognized by the government. In Rhode Island, which had no such requirements, Quakers served in and at times dominated the colonial government.

During the periodic wars between England and France, Friends' refusal to train as soldiers brought fines, and occasionally imprisonment. Meetings disciplined those who participated in military trainings, enlisted in the militia, paid substitutes, shipped out on privateering vessels, or paid taxes levied specifically for military expeditions. New England Friends did not, however, take disciplinary action against Quakers serving in the Rhode Island Assembly or as governor, who helped the English war efforts against France in their official capacities.

REFORM, ANTI-SLAVERY, AND WAR, 1750–1790

By the 1750s some Quaker ministers, especially in Philadelphia and England, grew concerned that Friends had become indifferent and apathetic. After a century of “birthright” membership, there were many in the Society who had never had a personal spiritual transformation. Prosperity, hard work, and sharing in the “worldly” social life of their communities left little energy for diligent adherence to the Gospel. The reformers hoped to revive the prophetic faithfulness to Truth that had inspired early Friends.

Although these ministers differed in their emphases, all agreed on the prescription for reform: more diligent attention to discipline. Friends needed to build up the “walls” separating themselves from “the world” and its people, especially the rules against marrying out of the Society. Friends should attend meetings for worship more regularly, keep to plainness of dress and language, and stay away from taverns, social events like weddings and corn huskings, and other entertainments involving vain music and dancing.

In 1760 New England Yearly Meeting, responding to these calls for reform, ordered copies of the Book of Discipline (drawn largely from minutes coming from London) for each monthly meeting and preparative meeting. It directed each meeting to set up visiting committees to visit every Friend's family, report infractions of the rules, and work to convince the Friend of his or her error. Some offenders acknowledged their errors; others were disowned or indicated that they did not care to continue in membership.

One of the matters for discipline concerned Friends' use of enslaved labor. By the 1750s the number of Friends opposing or at least troubled by slavery had grown, and meetings found it more difficult to ignore them. John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, respected Philadelphia-area ministers, argued that slavery was inconsistent with the Gospel, especially the golden rule, and with the natural rights of humankind. Woolman traveled throughout New England in 1760, laboring with individual slave-owning families and pressuring the Society's leaders to clarify that slave-owning was wrong.

New England Yearly Meeting gradually changed the wording in the Book of Discipline to clarify first that Friends should not buy or sell slaves, and then, in 1773, that all should "be discharged & set free from a State of Slavery, that we do no more claim property in the human race." Those who refused to manumit all those held in slavery were disowned, including some prominent and wealthy members. A few Africans joined New England meetings, and more undoubtedly attended meetings for worship, though, as in other churches, they were often required to sit on a back bench or in the gallery.

Friends faced increasing tensions in the 1770s as conflicts grew between the colonies and Great Britain. Most Friends accepted a religious duty of loyalty to the English monarch, based on Paul's admonition that the ruling authorities were put there by God and should be obeyed. Many New England Friends also had longstanding commercial links with merchants in England and

other English colonies. Epistles from London Yearly Meeting, still considered the parent meeting, stressed the need to preserve unity and avoid disruption.

Some New England Friends embraced the growing protests against Crown excesses. But many others scrupled at cooperating in any way with the rebel government, which seemed to them an unlawful rebellion against legitimate authority as well as inherently war-making. Friends disagreed over use of Continental currency and taxes levied by the Continental Congress. The Yearly Meeting advised that those with more restrictive scruples should heed them, and that Friends of varying opinions should treat each other with love and charity.

Once war broke out, meetings firmly disciplined Friends who joined the army or navy or supplied them with provisions. As in earlier conflicts, Friends who refused to participate in military activities faced punishment by the civil authorities. Meetings sent lists of these faithful Friends to the Yearly Meeting's Meeting for Sufferings, which apparently reimbursed the penalties.

The war significantly disrupted Friends' lives. During the British military occupation of Newport, Rhode Island, many residents fled the island, and Yearly Meeting sessions had to be held elsewhere. Boston too was occupied by British troops and put under a naval blockade. The Yearly Meeting's newly formed Meeting for Sufferings appointed a committee who delivered relief to Friends and non-Friends alike; Friends in Philadelphia and Britain also contributed to this effort.

ACTIVISM, EDUCATION, AND DIVISION, 1790–1850

Independence brought many changes to the social and economic life of New England Friends. The rural farms that had anchored many pre-war Quaker meetings declined. Meeting minutes recorded a quickening pace of removals to newer meetings in western Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, and upstate New York.

A Quaker-dominated whaling industry in New Bedford largely replaced the older one on Nantucket. Many New England Quakers invested money and energy in local economic development, including textile mills, canals, and later railroads.

Some Friends sought better education for their children, consistent with Quaker ways, to prepare them for roles in the new economy. In 1784 the Yearly Meeting established a small boarding school in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, with subsidies for poor Quaker children. But the school did not attract enough funds or students to continue. By 1819 a renewed concern enabled the Yearly Meeting to reopen a boarding school. Retired merchant Moses Brown gave considerable money and part of his Providence farm for the school building and would serve on the school committee for many years.

A number of Friends joined campaigns to abolish the slave trade and emancipate those held in slavery. During the 1780s, due partly to pressure from these abolition societies, each New England state took steps toward gradual emancipation. In 1783 the Yearly Meeting asked each meeting to examine past manumissions to make sure that Friends had made an appropriate financial settlement to their former servants. But meetings disciplined some radical anti-slavery advocates for being too “warm” or passionate, for participating in anti-slavery groups with non-Quakers, or for accepting violent methods to achieve abolition.

An unknown number of New England Friends helped formerly enslaved people find new lives in New England or in Canada. Whaling captain Paul Cuffe of Westport Meeting, son of a Wampanoag mother and an African father formerly enslaved in a Quaker family, actively promoted self-help programs for freed slaves in Sierra Leone. Other Friends provided financial assistance to individual freed Africans and to African-run churches, schools, and self-help associations in their New England communities.

The Yearly Meeting Divides

In the 1820s theological differences between more orthodox and more liberal Protestants intensified throughout the wider society. Among Friends, some leaned toward a more “orthodox” view that the Holy Scriptures, inspired by God, stood as the primary authority and that Christ’s death, atonement, and resurrection held the key to salvation. Others, including Long Island minister Elias Hicks, stressed that the ultimate authority was the living Christ (or Holy Spirit), the Bible was essential but not binding, and that inward transformation was the essence of salvation. At least in Philadelphia, the more urban orthodox Friends were more willing to work with non-Friends on abolition and other social causes. Rural “Hicksite” Friends criticized the urban meetings’ worldly education, corruption by wealthy evangelicals and Anglicans, and attempts to centralize authority at the expense of local meetings. Each side claimed to be the sole voice of traditional Quakerism. In 1827 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting formally divided. The schism quickly spread as each Yearly Meeting had to choose which Philadelphia group it would recognize as the legitimate Yearly Meeting.

In 1828 New England Yearly Meeting minuted its unity with “those meetings which have continued steadfast in their adherence to the ancient order, discipline and faith of the Society,” that is, the “Orthodox” branch. Nantucket was the only place where “Hicksites” had enough strength to form a separate meeting. Elsewhere, some individuals left the Society to join Unitarian or other more liberal churches.

In the next major division within the Society of Friends, New England played a major role. In 1836, Joseph John Gurney, an evangelical Friends’ minister from a wealthy English banking family, traveled widely in the United States. He criticized the overly formal, uninspired, tradition-bound atmosphere of many Quaker meetings, urging Friends to actively train ministers and leaders, open Sunday Schools, allow hymn-singing as an aid to worship, use new scholarship to illuminate the Bible, and work

with other evangelical Christians on reform causes such as education, abolition, and temperance.

Many Friends in New England found Gurney's advice exciting, refreshing, and forward-looking. Others, however, recoiled in horror, accusing Gurney of elevating the authority of Scripture over the Holy Spirit itself, and of too much influence from his wealthy and social-activist, Anglican friends. As Gurney traveled in New England, Rhode Island minister John Wilbur followed him to warn Friends against Gurney's errors. After several more years of vehement arguments, in 1845 the majority Gurneyites dissolved Wilbur's meeting to force Wilbur's disownment. After an unsuccessful appeal, Wilbur and his supporters, outraged, reconstituted their meeting and joined with like-minded Friends to form their own Yearly Meeting.

After the division the larger "Gurneyite" body, calling itself "the Yearly Meeting of Friends for New England," had about 8,000 members, most of the meetinghouses, and the Providence boarding school. Most orthodox Yearly Meetings, including London, recognized it as the legitimate body. The smaller "Wilburite" body, retaining the name of "New England Yearly Meeting of Friends," had about 500 members concentrated in rural Rhode Island. Both meetings continued to use the 1809 Book of Discipline, and both held their Yearly Meeting sessions in late June, as they had since 1661. For almost a century, they barely acknowledged each other's existence.

During the Civil War, many Friends struggled to reconcile their fervent desire for abolition of slavery with their equally fervent opposition to war. This time, however, meetings generally did not discipline men who served in the Union Army. The peace testimony remained official policy, but increasingly the concrete decisions on how to live it out were considered matters for individual discernment.

A DIVIDED HERITAGE, 1865–1915: TWO YEARLY MEETINGS

The Yearly Meeting of Friends for New England (Gurneyite)

For several decades after the separation, the Gurneyite meetings retained traditional patterns of Quaker life and worship. In the late 1800s, however, many meetings adopted a new format, with a paid pastor and a programmed worship service. This “pastoral” system began in the Midwest, as traveling ministers sought to make sure new converts were nurtured and did not fall away, and meetings tried to ensure more consistent leadership by releasing a minister from other paid employment. Some Friends feared that meetings would depend too much on the pastor and fail to develop other members’ gifts in ministry. By 1910, however, virtually all Gurneyite meetings in New England used the new pattern. Many remodeled their meetinghouses to add a raised platform, a pulpit, and an organ. Most meetings had active Sunday Schools; some had Christian Endeavor youth groups and periodic revival meetings.

Gurneyite Friends in New England, echoing Friends’ early enthusiasm for spreading their message, joined in the Protestant zeal for foreign missions. Sybil and Eli Jones of Maine opened a girls’ school in Ramallah, Palestine, which came under the Yearly Meeting’s care in 1888. In 1884 the Women’s Yearly Meeting established a Women’s Foreign Mission Society “to promote the knowledge of the Gospel among heathen women and children, and to assist in their Christian education.” Adults and children throughout New England learned about people in other parts of the world, prayed for them, and sent books and supplies. New England women joined with those in eleven other Yearly Meetings to form the Women’s Foreign Missionary Union of Friends, forerunner of the United Society of Friends Women. Many New England Friends spent anywhere from one year to most of their working lives serving in Quaker missions in Palestine, Cuba, East Africa, and elsewhere as teachers, doctors, or evangelists.

The Yearly Meeting of Friends for New England welcomed opportunities to join with like-minded Friends elsewhere. It sent representatives to an 1887 conference in Richmond, Indiana, which produced a common statement of principles known as the Richmond Declaration of Faith. In 1888 the Gurneyite Yearly Meeting minuted its acceptance of this declaration. The minutes included a report from Friends who attended the Richmond Conference, which said, “[The Conference] produced and published a Declaration of Christian Doctrine, which it is hoped and believed will have a salutary influence upon Friends everywhere. We believe that its excellence is not in its force as a creed, not that it is a perfect summary of Christian truth, but because on the whole it is the most complete statement of doctrine which the time and means at hand allowed, given forth by a body of large experience, of intellectual power and religious weight; and that whatever defects exist in it, still it carries the weight and influence of a broader representation of the Society of Friends, than ever assembled on any other occasion.”

In 1902 the same meetings formed the Five Years’ Meeting (later renamed Friends United Meeting), and approved a Uniform Discipline, which the Gurneyite New England body adopted. These New England Friends were increasingly linked with other Gurneyite Friends through the Five Years’ Meeting, periodic conferences, pastors who moved between Yearly Meetings, and the weekly *American Friend*.

New England Yearly Meeting of Friends (Wilburite)

Wilburite Friends, though few in number, held fast to the Quaker ways of life and worship as they understood them. Like their Quietist forebears, they treasured waiting worship and ministry given by any member called to it. They valued the Inward Christ more than the “outward” or historical Christ, though they remained deeply rooted in the Bible. They distrusted any source of knowledge outside the Spirit, particularly rational or secular education, and opposed participation in outside causes or mixed societies. The New England body corresponded with Wilburite

and conservative bodies in Ohio, North Carolina, Iowa, and Canada, as well as with Philadelphia (Orthodox) Yearly Meeting—sending and receiving epistles and traveling ministers.

By 1900, however, the Wilburite Yearly Meeting also began to change. Younger Friends seemed less concerned than their parents with maintaining purity of doctrine and practice at all costs. Meetings relaxed their enforcement of the Discipline on matters such as dress and marriage outside the Society, although the written rules remained in place and offenders had to make public acknowledgement of infractions. By 1907 the Yearly Meeting gave up separate men's and women's business sessions. Opposition to higher education faded, as an increasing number attended non-Quaker boarding schools and colleges. While some members still farmed, many undertook professional work as doctors, bankers, and teachers that increasingly took them away from the Rhode Island communities where the Wilburite meetings had been rooted.

THE GROWING SEARCH FOR UNITY, 1914–1945

World War I

Throughout World War I Friends of both Yearly Meetings maintained their formal opposition to war, both as a personal testimony and in attempts to influence public policy. Meetings sent letters to President Wilson supporting the League of Nations proposal, and lauding the 1913 peace declaration of Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm. Some Friends joined the new interfaith Fellowship of Reconciliation.

When the United States entered the war and introduced conscription, some New England Friends refused to register for the draft, which, due to the fact that conscientious objector status did not exist at the time, resulted in imprisonment and sometimes torture. Others chose hospital work or other non-combatant duty within the military. In contrast to most earlier wars, meet-

ings did not discipline these Friends. Some Friends worked with the newly formed American Friends Service Committee, which sought to bring together Friends from all branches for common relief projects and to provide an alternative to military service. Following the war, an All-Friends Conference in 1920, hosted by London Yearly Meeting, brought together Friends of all branches from throughout North America and Europe to consider the spiritual roots of the peace testimony.

1920s: Struggle and Decline

During the 1920s many New England meetings struggled. Young people left rural communities for mill towns, cities, and better farmland in the West. Farm income fluctuated widely.

Many of the Gurneyite pastoral meetings had trouble supporting a paid pastor, relying on students, non-Quaker preachers, or part-time ministers. Some joined in federation with another church. Yearly Meeting of Friends for New England's leaders pleaded for young people to consider a call to pastoral ministry or service in overseas missions. College exposed an increasing number of Quaker youth to new theories of psychology and Biblical criticism, which led many students to challenge accepted orthodoxies.

In 1925 the Gurneyite Yearly Meeting substantially changed the mission of its boarding school (renamed for Moses Brown) to a college preparatory program for boys only. The Yearly Meeting acquired Lincoln School, a private girls' school in Providence, and also took on care of Oak Grove Academy in Maine.

The Wilburite New England Yearly Meeting of Friends also struggled. The meeting dwindled numerically; by 1920 it had only about 125 members in three monthly meetings. As attendance declined, midweek meetings, long a mark of spiritual faithfulness, were shifted from mornings to evenings and then discontinued; meetings for business shifted to weekends, to accommodate Friends with professional jobs. A few traditionalists viewed these changes with alarm, as a sign of declining faith.

By the early 1930s, the older generation of Wilburite ministers and elders had died. Many of the Yearly Meeting's younger leaders held professional jobs in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia and participated in meetings there, but retained their membership in Rhode Island and returned faithfully for Yearly Meeting sessions and committee meetings. But they worried about the spiritual vitality and very existence of their small Yearly Meeting. In 1930 the Wilburite Yearly Meeting adopted a new Book of Discipline—its first since 1809—drawn largely from the 1926 Faith & Practice of Philadelphia (Orthodox) Yearly Meeting.

Building on relationships developed through AFSC and the 1920 All-Friends Conference, the two Yearly Meetings in New England began cautiously to exchange official epistles and visitors, recognizing their differences but grateful for a shared spirit of Christian fellowship. Younger Friends from the two bodies held joint social activities beginning in the late 1930s. Some Friends wondered if it might be possible to merge the two Yearly Meetings. But many found the differences in size and worship style insurmountable.

New Meetings

The 1930s also saw the rise of new unprogrammed meetings within New England, mostly in college towns, which practiced waiting worship without a paid pastor. They brought together Friends (both students and teachers) from a variety of yearly meetings around the country, as well as pacifists and religious seekers attracted by Friends' message or form of worship. The new groups were encouraged and facilitated by the Advancement Committee of Friends General Conference (a national organization of Hicksite meetings) and by the Message Committee of the American Friends Service Committee, as well as by leading Friends such as Rufus Jones, Professor of Philosophy at Haverford College and editor of *American Friend*. The new meetings in New England, like many others around the country, chose not to affiliate with either of the existing Yearly Meetings, which they felt represented outdated factions. Several received

formal recognition by the American Friends Fellowship Council. The independent meetings grew rapidly during the 1930s, often incorporating members from the two Yearly Meetings.

Most of these new meetings followed a new model with a loosely knit structure, a weak (if any) central organization, frequent rotation of officers, and authority centered in the general membership rather than an elite class of ministers and elders. Membership criteria were loose and flexible, allowing for multiple affiliations and broad freedom of conscience and belief. In many meetings formal membership became almost irrelevant, as all attenders were encouraged to participate freely in vocal ministry and in meetings for business. Seating was arranged in a circle or square, with no elevated facing benches, reflecting an ideal of spiritual democracy. Many of those drawn to the new meetings came from churches they experienced as dogmatic, insular, and authoritarian. Desiring a spiritual home that was totally open and welcoming, many resisted suggestions of obedience to discipline.

Steps Toward Merger

Friends from diverse parts of the Quaker world increasingly worked together on common projects. In 1937 a Second World Conference at Swarthmore and Haverford Colleges brought together all who called themselves Friends for fellowship and mutual inspiration, and established an ongoing Friends World Committee for Consultation. New England Friends from the two Yearly Meetings as well as from the independent meetings became part of this organization. During World War II, Friends throughout New England held conferences to discuss conscription, financially supported men in Civilian Public Service camp and prison, and contributed funds and knit sweaters for AFSC material aid programs. In 1943 Friends in New England joined with others from all branches throughout the United States to form the Friends Committee on National Legislation to lobby Congress for changes in U.S. policy.

During the war the question of formally merging the various Quaker groups in New England resurfaced. The growing independent meetings had shifted the demographic balance between “programmed” and “unprogrammed” Friends, easing fears that the pastoral Gurneyite meetings might overwhelm the small Wilburite meetings. By 1944 the two Yearly Meetings and the independent meetings of New England agreed in principle on a merger. Each group was assured that it would not have to change its form of worship, its membership criteria, or its preferred Book of Discipline (if any). On that basis, each group approved the merger.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY, 1945–2007

The reunited New England Yearly Meeting first met in June 1945 with Rufus Jones, long an advocate of unity, as honorary presiding clerk. The meeting quickly affirmed its membership in the Five Years’ Meeting (later FUM).

Within a few years the Yearly Meeting prepared a new Faith & Practice, reflecting the diversity of beliefs and practices among its meetings. Rhode Island Monthly Meeting, which had expressed hesitations about the merger, found the new book unacceptable, and withdrew from New England Yearly Meeting to join what is now Evangelical Friends Church—Eastern Region.

As hoped, the united Yearly Meeting found new energy for expansion and activity. Junior Yearly Meeting, begun in the Gurneyite meeting in 1930, expanded significantly. The Yearly Meeting gradually added full-time youth staff and a growing program of weekend youth retreats. In 1953 the Yearly Meeting opened a summer youth camp in China, Maine.

New England Friends have continued their concern for education, albeit in different forms. The Yearly Meeting ended its oversight of Lincoln School in 1976—though the school continues to affirm its Quaker roots and values—while Moses

Brown became coeducational. The Moses Brown boarding department closed in 1982. Some New England Friends with a concern for education founded The Meeting School in New Hampshire (1957), Cambridge Friends School (1961), and Friends School of Portland (2005).

The Gurneyite home for aged Friends in Amesbury, Massachusetts, moved to Hingham, Massachusetts, renamed as New England Friends Home, and later became a certified assisted-living facility. Beacon Hill Friends House and Woolman Hill, each initially proposed as a Yearly Meeting project, were established as independent institutions. In 1974 a concern for aging Friends took shape as an intentional community in North Easton, Massachusetts, though financial difficulties eventually forced the sale of the homes and the laying down of the meeting there.

New England Friends have also engaged with social issues locally and overseas, often in cooperation with the American Friends Service Committee. Many participated in vigils leading to the 1962 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. During the Vietnam War, many Friends provided draft counseling and at least one meetinghouse served as sanctuary to an AWOL soldier. Friends' long tradition of peacemaking has attracted many new attenders, some of whom remain more interested in social activism than in traditional Quaker teachings. A number of Friends have undertaken prison ministries, leading to recognized worship groups in several correctional facilities. NEYM has endorsed the Earth Charter, and many meetings and individual Friends actively witness for and engage in stewardship of the Earth.

New England Friends have also been involved in various forms of activity against racial segregation and discrimination. Many participated in "Fair Housing" campaigns. Starting in 1969, the Yearly Meeting, responding in part to demands by "Black Power" groups for reparations for African-Americans, raised over \$100,000 for scholarships for minority students at Friends' schools and for economic development projects in poor and minority communities in New England.

Some Friends have participated in educational programs against racism, while others have joined with other Friends of African descent to explore and strengthen their identity as Friends of color.

Changing societal mores during the 1970s also influenced the Yearly Meeting. As divorce increased, many Friends openly questioned traditional testimonies on marriage and sexuality. These conversations moved from the back porch at Yearly Meeting sessions into a committee of Ministry and Counsel, which in 1976 published *Living With Oneself and Others*, a thoughtful exploration of sexual ethics, marriage, divorce, and family life. Gay and lesbian Friends and their allies began to join members of the wider society in advocating for recognition of their identity and families, including the right to marry under the care of the meeting. Many Friends experienced these changes as the fruits of deep and often painful spiritual discernment. Some Friends feared too much influence from the secular and media-driven world. Many monthly meetings have approved taking same-gender marriages or unions under their care, although as of 2008 the Yearly Meeting has not found unity as a body on this question.

New England Friends have maintained connections with Friends in other parts of the world. A steady list of New England Friends have worked with Quaker meetings, institutions, and projects in Ramallah, East Africa, and elsewhere, under the care of Friends United Meeting, the American Friends Service Committee, and Right Sharing of World Resources, among others. Many others have worked with Central American refugees, economic development projects, and mediation of international conflicts. Many Friends have participated in international Quaker gatherings, including hosting FWCC's 20th Triennial in New Hampshire in 2000. Young adult Friends from New England attended World Gatherings of Young Friends in 1985 and 2005, and in 1991 attended three Young Friends International Gatherings, each following one location of FWCC's Fifth World Conference of Friends.

Challenged by this conference and a keynote address given at the 1991 NEYM Sessions by a Cuban Friend, Yearly Meeting subsequently approved establishing a “sister relationship” with Friends in Cuba. Through annual visits in both directions, this “Puente de Amigos” has enriched the spiritual life of both yearly meetings.

Since 1945 the number of unprogrammed meetings has grown, most adopting the model of the formerly independent meetings. In 1959 the united body joined Friends General Conference, an association of primarily liberal, unprogrammed meetings and Yearly Meetings, while continuing its primary ties with Friends United Meeting. As of 2008, only seven meetings retain pastoral leadership and programmed worship, and few of the others have any paid staff. New England meetings have attracted a wide range of seekers, many of whom describe their spiritual path in other than Christian terms.

Almost a quarter of NEYM’s current monthly meetings were established after 1980. A third of our meetings and worship groups are small (under twenty-five participants). Many meetings, small and large, have attracted a large number of new Friends. Some, however, have expressed the need for more grounding in Friends’ ways.

Our diversity has created both rich and inspiring variety as well as tension within New England Yearly Meeting. Many contemporary controversies echo those of the past: disagreements about the relative authority of the Bible and immediate spiritual experience, cultural and political differences, differing views on the authority of yearly and monthly meetings over their members, and differing leadings towards Christian evangelism and social or political activism.

For more than three hundred and fifty years, Quakers in New England have experienced a living faith, rooted in a prophetic vision, and put into practice by each believer in his or her own life and by communities of believers acting together. Friends

have responded to myriad challenges with the confidence, born of experience, that a people willing to follow God's promptings in their hearts can continue Christ's work in the world. Continued study of our past and ongoing waiting on God in communal worship and spiritual discernment can illuminate the path on which we are now called to travel.

For further reading:

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