

GUILFORD COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

~ QUAKER HISTORY ~



New Garden Meeting, Guilford County

This page is designed to assist those of Quaker ancestry in tracing their roots through Guilford County. Any suggestions and contributions of information are welcome.

HISTORY OF GUILFORD COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

The History of Guilford County, North Carolina, U.S.A., to 1980, A.D.

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Volume One

Guilford County's First 150 Years

by Blackwell P. Robinson

Chapter IV ~ Soon the Quakers Followed

Next to settle in Guilford County were Quakers, the Society of Friends. They first established themselves in a beautiful rural setting, now called Guilford College, about six miles west of the present center of Greensboro. They called their frontier settlement, appropriately enough, New Garden, a name which they had brought with them from New Garden Meeting in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The latter, in turn, had been named for an earlier New Garden in County Carlow, Ireland. (1)

Dorothy Gilbert Thorne, the leading authority on the history of New Garden, relates that there was a tradition that this New Garden was so named in admiration of the “new garden” spot found by the settlers. This latter seems unlikely, because as late as 1833 a visiting friend from Rhode Island described their meeting house as standing in an old and majestic wilderness containing about fifty acres.

Just when the first Friends came to this “majestic wilderness” is unknown, but certainly there were a few here by 1751. That year Friends at Cane Creek in present Alamance County, comprising the first permanent meeting settled by the Pennsylvania Friends in North Carolina, requested a monthly meeting from the Perquimans and Little River meetings in eastern Carolina. Their petition stated: “There is Thirty Families and upwards of Friends settled in them Parts and Desire still in behalf of themselves and their Friends to have a Monthly Meeting settled amongst them.” Not surprisingly, the first piece of business to come before Cane Creek Monthly Meeting (October 7, 1751) was a request from Friends of New Garden for permission to hold a meeting for worship.

At first there was no meeting house, and there is an amusing tradition in regard to their pioneer meeting: Two great logs were placed to form an angle. The leaders sat at the vertex and, supposedly, the men sat on one log, the women on the other, in the typical Quaker tradition of separating the sexes. Then, to prevent their horses from straying during the extended silent meeting, they drove them into the open angle and closed it by a third log, thus forming a triangle.

It is known that the first meeting in a private dwelling was in the home of Thomas Beals in February 1752. It is also known that some ninety three public Friends from the North, from eastern Carolina, and from Europe attended meetings between the years 1752 and 1778, attesting to the early importance of New Garden. This list is in the handwriting of William Hunt, one of the early members.

The earliest description of New Garden Meeting was by one of these visitors, Catherine Payton Phillips, an English Quaker, who wrote of her visit in 1753:

We set out next morning [after spending the night in the woods] in hopes of reaching a settlement of Friends at New Garden that day; but ... we thought it best to stop at William Rinald’s [Reynolds?] at Polecat, who was under the possession of Truth; and the next day, being the First of the week, we had a meeting there with a few friends, and some of the neighbours; which was exercising, yet ended in a sense of Divine sweetness.

The 24th [December], we went to New Garden, and staid amongst Friends in that settlement till the 28th. This was a new settlement of Friends, and we were the first from Europe that had visited them, or traveled in these parts in the service of Truth.

We had pretty close service among them, and laboured for the establishment of a meeting for ministers and elders in their monthly meetings; which we found was much wanting; and we had reason to hope that the proposition would be adopted; divers Friends being convinced of its usefulness, and seemed glad that it became our concern to recommend it. (2)

The names of the first families of New Garden cannot be determined in the order of their arrival, but the settlement had grown to forty families of Quakers by May 25, 1754, as attested to by the Minutes of Perquimans and Little River Quarterly Meeting of that date:

Friends at New Garden requested this meeting to Grant them the privilege of holding a Monthly Meeting amongst them by Reason of the hardship they underwent in Attending the Monthly Meeting at Cane Creek; and it appearing to this meeting that there is Near or Quite forty families of Friends seated in them parts; In consideration of which, this meeting thought proper to grant them there request.

A complete list of the forty families of “them parts” cannot be made, but William Wade Hinshaw in the Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy, Volume I, North Carolina Yearly Meeting, lists the heads of seventeen families probably among the original forty as follows: Thomas Beals, Benjamin Beeson from Deep River, William Beeson, Abraham Cook, Daniel Dillon, Eleazer Hunt, William Hunt, Mordecai Mendenhall from Deep River; John Mills, Henry Mills, Hur Mills, Thomas Mills, Benjamin Rudduck, John Rudduck, Thomas Thornbrugh, Thomas Vestal, and Richard Williams. Men from Deep River Meeting are included, because New Garden first included both Deep River and Centre Meetings. This means, of course, that the forty families were spread over a rather wide area, Deep River being six miles southwest of New Garden and Centre eighteen miles southeast.

Between the time the Monthly Meeting was set up in 1754 and the year 1770, New Garden Monthly Meeting received a total of eight-six certificates, many of them

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given for whole families. In this tide of immigration came families from Pennsylvania – the Coxes, the Unthanks, Johnsons, Pidgeons, Beesons, Ozburnes, Joneses, Elliotts, Kendalls, Reynolds, Fraziers, Worths, Mendenhalls, and Dennises; from Virginia came the Hoggatts (Hocketts), Johnsons, Beesons, Britains, Beals, Langleys, Hiattas, Kerseys, Stanleys, Ballingers, and from eastern Carolina came the Lambs. (3)

The year 1771 brought another tide of immigrants, this time from the island of Nantucket, Rhode Island. Within the next five years, fifty certificates were received, forty-one of them coming from that island. Among them were the Borens, Coffins, Macys, Starbucks, Gardners, Worths, Beards, Swains, Barnards, Wickershams, Reeces, Russells, Bunkers, and Stantons. Their exodus from Nantucket has been attributed to the fact that they had heard of the fertile lands of Carolina at their yearly meeting and having inspected them, cheerfully quit an island in which there was no longer any room for them. Conditions which they found in Piedmont Carolina were set forth in a letter, dated April 10, 1773, from William and Phebe Macy Stanton to their parents on Nantucket.

They wrote:

It is a difficult time to these parts on some counts. Iron and Salt scarce and dear. Salt not as dear as has been. To be had now for 15 or 16 dollars. I brought paper money which is of small account here away. As for our circumstances, we can't complain of, for we have plenty enough to subsist on at present. Many articles thou mentioned in thy letter is not so dear here as I managed to get molasses 2 dollars a gallon. Flour 2s6p wood for cutting. We raised about 320 bushels corn, 50 wheat, 100 oats and meat plenty. Flax 150 or 200. There is no goods in these parts to be had. We made all the cloth we ware. (4)

With the coming of the Revolution, the southward movement of Friends nearly stopped. In fact, from 1783 until 1800 there were only thirteen certificates received at New Garden, and this gain, mostly from Pennsylvania, was offset by the loss of five who returned home. The final significant migration to New Garden came during the early 1800's from the eastern North Carolina Meeting of Perquimans. This movement was encouraged by Henry, Jacob, and Joseph Lamb, who had arrived earlier. (5)

Another group – indirectly related to the Quakers – who came to Guilford shortly after the Revolution were the so-called Nicholites. Their leader was Joseph Nichols, who originated this sect in Caroline County, Maryland. Settling on Deep River, they were soon absorbed by the larger body of Orthodox Quakers and, as a distinct sect, became extinct. (6)

Meanwhile the New Garden settlement became the focal point of Quakerism in North Carolina and in the South. Having been granted a Quarterly Meeting in 1787 and a Yearly Meeting in 1791, it was responsible for establishing other meetings in the area.

The founding of Centre Friends Meeting in southern Guilford may be traced to the early 1750's when William Hockett, a Quaker pioneer from Pennsylvania, is said to have tied his pony to a sapling about three miles east of Polecat Creek in the southern part of present Guilford. When he went down to a beautiful spring he encountered a camp of friendly Indians, who entreated him to sojourn among them. Later he built a crude log cabin on a 640 acre tract, purchased from the Earl of Granville, the title to which was granted in 1759. (7)

Hockett was soon followed by other Pennsylvania Quakers in search of homesites – John Bales, Richard Beeson, Peter Dix, and others. According to tradition, their nearest white neighbors were those at Cane Creek on one side and New Garden on the other, a distance of eighteen miles each way. It seems quite natural that they should have called their settlement “Centre” - a spelling which still prevails. Having brought their memberships with them, they joined New Garden Monthly Meeting in 1754 and often walked the eighteen miles to attend meeting. (8)

Three years later the older meeting granted Centre Friends the privilege of holding their own meetings for worship from house to house. As they increased in number, a larger and more permanent place of worship was needed. Accordingly in 1763 they purchased (for twenty shillings) from Peter Dix a plot of land twenty-four rods square upon which they erected a log meeting house. Their settlement continued to grow and in 1772 they were granted their own Monthly Meeting by the Quarterly Meetings in Orange and Rowan. Indicative of their growth is the fact that in 1780 they built a larger meeting house, where the North Carolina Yearly Meeting was held in 1787 and again in 1789.

Deep River Friends Meeting also owes its parenthood to the New Garden Meeting. In 1754 the older meeting granted permission to Friends at Deep River for a meeting to be held regularly according to their records – at “the home of Benjamin Beeson, except when it is held at Mordecai Mendenhall's.” A log meeting place was erected in 1758, supposedly using the conventional Quaker pattern with a movable partition separating the men's and women's business sessions. One account says the place “looked very much like a barn ... and was warmed by stoves, whose pipes extending through the overhead ceiling, discharged their contents into the space beneath the rafters. The final escape of this smoke was through the cracks between the shingles. Why the house did not burn down is an unsolved riddle.” Also something of a riddle is the fact that the deed for the forty acres on which the house stood was not given until 1809. (10)

This settlement soon became the center of a very active community engaging in trade and local industry. People came long distances to procure the products of their sawmills, grist mills, potteries, tanneries, hardware stores, and hat shops. Though many gun shops were in the vicinity, none of the pacifist Quakers made guns.

As was true of most of the earliest graveyards, there is no record of the names of the greater part of the people buried in the oldest part. Most of the graves are either unmarked or marked with crude illegible stones, some etched with initials or a date. This custom was in keeping with a

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later admonition in their Discipline as revised in 1869. “Friends are also enjoined to maintain our testimony against affixing superfluous monuments, of any description, to graves.” Among the earliest settlers, and thus the earliest names of those buried here, are the Beesons, Folgers, Gardners, Mendenhalls, Starbucks, Chipmans, Iddingses, Haineses, Howells, and many others. (12)

The serenity of Quaker life was soon shaken up by the approach of the War of the Regulation, which reached its climax in 1771, and, four years later, the American Revolution. In the main they took no part in the actual fighting, pleading their pacifist principles. However, after the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, they did aid in caring for the wounded, both American and British.

No account of the early Quakers of Guilford County would be complete without mention of two families whose offspring reached the White House. John and Mary Payne removed on certificate from Cedar Creek Monthly Meeting in Virginia to New Garden Meeting in 1765 and during their four-year residence here – according to the New Garden Monthly Meeting Records (I, 29) – “Dolley, their daughter was born ye 20 of ye 5 mo. 1768.” Unfortunately, there are no other extant sources as to the birth of the inimitable Dolley Payne Todd Madison, who often served as Thomas Jefferson’s official hostess and then as First Lady, in her own right, as wife of the fourth President of the United States.

A branch of the family of the thirty-seventh President, Richard Milhous Nixon, may also be traced to Guilford County. The Milhous and Mendenhall names are conspicuous through the monthly meeting records of the Quaker settlements in the county and many have been prominent in the state’s history. President Nixon’s descent from these two families is reported by a presidential aide:

Although the President has not traced his family’s background, various pieces of information provided by friends and other family members indicated that one of the President’s mother’s great-great grandmothers was named Jemima Mendenhall. The daughter of one Joshua Mendenhall and his wife, Lydia, Jemima Mendenhall was born on December 9, 1757. On June 30, 1779, she married Thomas Vickers and she died on December 5, 1851. Her daughter, Martha Vickers, born March 27, 1786, married William Milhous on June 10, 1807. (13)

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FOOTNOTES

(1) Dorothy Lloyd Gilbert (Thorne), First Friends at New Garden in North Carolina (Reprint from the Autumn Number 1945 of the Bulletin of Friends Historical Association, Philadelphia), n.p. Unless otherwise cited, all references to New Garden in this chapter are from this source.

(2) Catherine Phillips, Memoirs of the Life of Catherine Phillips: To Which Are Added Some of Her Epistles (London: Printed and Sold by James Phillips and Son, 1797), pp. 77-79.

(3) Dorothy Lloyd Gilbert, Guilford, A Quaker College (Guilford College: Trustees of Guilford College, 1937), p. 20.

(4) Robert H. Frazier, “Nantucket and North Carolina.” A paper delivered to the North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1947.

(5) Gary J. Tucker, “The Formative Period of Religion in Guilford County”, p. 19.

(6) Ibid., p. 20.

(7) Willard Mendenhall (ed.), History of Centre Friends Meeting, 1757-1954. Booklet published locally, 1954.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Ibid.

(10) Francis Charles Anscombe, I Have Called You Friends: The Story of Quakerism in North Carolina (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1959), pp. 315-316; Anon., “Deep River Friends Meeting” Booklet, 1954), n.p.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Anon., “Deep River Friends Meeting,” n.p.

(13) John R. Brown, III, (staff assistant to President Nixon) to William F. Mendenhall, April 7, 1969. Quaker Room, Guilford College Library.

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