The Quaker Tradition: Sustaining Women's Rights

In July 1848, a group of women gathered socially at the home of Jane and Richard Hunt in Waterloo, New York. The group consisted of Lucretia Mott from Philadelphia, her sister, Martha Coffin Wright of Auburn, New York, Mott's friend, Elizabeth Stanton from Seneca Falls, Mary Ann M'Clintock of Waterloo, and Jane Hunt. Mary Ann M'Clintock and Jane Hunt were Quakers, and members of Junius Friends Meeting; Lucretia Mott was a Quaker; Martha Coffin Wright had been raised as a Friend but had been disowned for marrying out of meeting. These were the women who organized the First Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls. The public sessions at the Convention itself were chaired by men: James Mott, Lucretia's Quaker husband, and Thomas M'Clintock, Mary Ann's husband and former clerk of Genesee Yearly Meeting. All the organizers were Quakers-- a former Quaker in the case of Martha Wright-- except Stanton.

The First Woman's Rights Convention, held July 19th and 20th, 1848, was conceived, organized and carried to a successful conclusion within eleven days. Three hundred people attended from as far away as Rochester and Syracuse, and at the end one hundred were willing to sign the Declaration of Sentiments. The rapid and successful organization of the Convention was possible because of the availability of a preexisting network of radical reformers. To understand the network, we should look not to Seneca Falls, but to nearby Waterloo, New York, and more specifically to Junius Friends (that is, Quaker) Meeting, situated about two miles north-west of the village of Waterloo on Nine Foot Road.

Quaker women historically had a high degree of authority and autonomy within the Society of Friends. This dated from the origins of the Society almost two centuries before. The classic statement of Quaker theology, Robert Barclay's Apology for True Christian Divinity (1676), defends women's preaching with the quotation from Paul that "male and female are one in Jesus Christ." Women could be ministers and elders, positions not available to women in other churches. In New York State in the 1830s, more women than men were acknowledged ministers in the Society. The Meetings of Ministers and Elders-- also known as select meetings-- included both men and women. Corporate authority in the Society of Friends was exercised by the monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings. In meetings for worship, men and women sat on opposite sides of the meeting house. In the monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings, a physical partition was lowered to divide the meeting house into two equal spaces, so that the men's and the women's meetings could conduct business separately. Actions generally required the concurrence of both the men's and women's meetings.

Quakers were therefore used to seeing women in positions of authority and as participants in temporal (Quaker) affairs. Thomas Clarkson, an outside observer of Quakers in England in the early 19th century observed unmatched involvement of Quaker women in the affairs of the Society, "[G]ives them, in fact, a new cast of character. It produces in them, a considerable knowledge of human nature. It produces in them thought, and foresight, and judgement... It elevates in them a sense of their own dignity and importance..." Lydia Maria Child, the editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard, lived with Quaker families in New York in the 1830s. She observed that Quaker women "were superior to women in general in habits of reflection and independent modes of thinking... This staid and self-relying character in Quaker women I attribute to the fact that they share equally with men in the management of all business of the society."

The historical attitude of Quakers toward women has been used to explain the disproportionate representation of Quakers in the ranks of the abolition and woman's rights movements in the mid 19th century. There is, however, a more immediate background that helps explain the presence of Quaker women at the Seneca Falls Convention. In 1834, Hicksite Quakers in western New York, Canada and Michigan, formerly part of New York Yearly Meeting, established Genesee Yearly Meeting. Among the first orders of business was to review and alter the book of discipline inherited from New York Yearly Meeting.

One change, and a change that seems to have been adopted with little discussion and no apparent controversy, was to revise the section concerning men's and women's meetings. While Quaker women did have an unprecedented degree of autonomy and authority within the Society of Friends, a careful reading of the New York Yearly Meeting Discipline of 1826 shows that they did not have equality in meetings for business. The women's meeting could not receive or disown members without the "concurrence" of the men's meeting. Cases involving the joint care of the men's and women's meeting required the approval of the men's meeting, but only the "approbation" of the women's meeting. The inequity of the two meetings did not go unnoticed. James Mott, Lucretia's husband, writing in 1820, likened the situation to a body trying to operate with only half a head.

Where did the proposal to remove the inequity between the men's and women's meeting originate? From Junius Monthly Meeting at Waterloo in 1836. The proposal "that the discipline be so altered that men's and women's meetings shall stand on the same footing in all matters in which they are equally interested" was forwarded to Farmington Quarterly Meeting in January 1837, quickly considered and improved by them, and forwarded to Genesee Yearly meeting. The recommendation is considered by the yearly meeting in 1837, held over to the next yearly meeting to allow time for consideration, and then approved in 1838. When Genesee Yearly Meeting printed its Discipline in 1842, the separate sections explaining the functions of the men's and women's movement were replaced by a single session with the following explanation:
"In accordance with the declaration of the apostle, that male and female are one in Christ Jesus, the following rules of Discipline are to be understood as alike applicable to both sexes...

"Agreeably to the conclusion of our Yearly meeting, men's and women's meetings stand on the equal footing of common interest and common right.

And who were the members of Junius Monthly Meeting who initiated this change? Thomas and Mary Ann M'Clintock, Jane and (possibly) Richard P. Hunt, Margaret and George Pryor, Margaret and Azaliah Schooley, and others whose names appear on the declaration of sentiments. Other Declaration signers, including Amy Post and Rhoda DeGarmo, were on the committee of Farmington Quarterly Meeting that first considered the proposal from Junius.

The change, though radical in its implications, was a matter of Quakers making minor adjustments to their internal procedures. However, those same Friends who were initiating this and other changes to the discipline were also the Quakers who were actively involved in the abolitionist movement. In examining the network of reformers in the immediate vicinity of Waterloo and Seneca Falls, it is difficult and, I believe, impossible to disentangle the radical Quakers from the Garrisonian abolitionist network. In the decade prior to Seneca Falls, the M'Clintock house and to a lesser extent the Hunt house had been the focus of abolitionist activities in the region.

The relative equality of the men's and women's meetings was only one issue-- and apparently the least controversial issues - that concerned Genesee Friends in the 1830s and the 1840s. The other issues concerned authority among Friends, are not so easily resolved. What was the role of the ministers and elders of the Society of Friends in defining acceptable Quaker behavior. Two different viewpoints on authority were expressed by visitors to Genesee Yearly Meeting. Priscilla Hunt Cadwallader from Indiana, visiting Genesee Yearly Meeting in 1835 when Friends were beginning to think of revising the discipline. Cadwallader cautioned Friends to take great care and seek divine guidance, "lest they should inadvertently put it in the power of some to oppress others and thereby obstruct that growth which Truth would sanction." John Comly of Byberry, Pennsylvania, who visited Genesee Yearly Meeting in 1842, was distressed. Behind what he characterized as a "superficial spirit that would throw off all restraint, and order, and discipline" he saw "creaturely activity" rather than divine guidance and the growth of "lecturing, worldly spirit of the times."

The Discipline of Genesee Yearly Meeting, in common with those of the other yearly meetings, contained explicit prohibitions about any Quaker complicity in slavery, and indeed "any act by which the right of slavery is acknowledged." The same Discipline also advised Friends to "demean themselves circumspectly towards all men, in the peaceable spirit of the gospel" and to "avoid all political controversies." Yet Quakers had been actively writing, speaking and organizing against slavery for more than a century.

For the M'Clintocks and the other activists, active engagement in the abolitionist movement was a continuation of long-standing Quaker tradition as well as manifest religious duty. But for more conservative Friends, who were beginning to dominate the Genesee Yearly Meeting in the mid 1840s, Friends were in danger of seriously compromising their principles by mixing with the controversies and doubts of the world's people.

Radical Friends were not only involved in the abolitionist movement of central New York, but they were frequently the key organizers, lecturers and the officers of the local anti-slavery societies. The annual reports of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839 and 1840 record an abolition society at Waterloo, though none in Seneca Falls. These reports list the names of four contacts: Richard P. Hunt, at whose house the Seneca Falls Convention will be initiated; Thomas M'Clintock, at whose house the Declaration of Sentiments will be written; George Pryor, a signer of the Declaration; and a Charles Freebody, the only one of the four who is not identifiable as both a Quaker and Declaration signer.

All names of men. What of the women? While I do not have direct evidence of how the Waterloo Anti-Slavery Society conducted its business, there is documentation of how the nearby Galen Anti-Slavery Society felt. Galen is the township directly north of Junius, and the site of a Quaker meeting that was part of Junius Monthly Meeting. In July 1841, Jacob Ferris, Galen resident, member of Junius Monthly Meeting and a lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society wrote to the National Anti-Slavery Standard to report on a recent meeting of the Galen Anti-Slavery Society. The issue was not slavery, but moral agency and the status of women. The conclusion? That "Woman's duty and accountability to God are the same as those of man; therefore, they are both equal in religious rights. In the sight of God there is neither male nor female." While the context is abolition, the argument is a continuation of the Quaker argument made by Barclay in 1676 and in the Genesee Yearly Meeting Discipline.

Quaker men and women were the majority of officers of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society (established 1842). Mary Ann M'Clintock was a key organizer of the Anti-Slavery Fairs in Waterloo and Rochester from 1843 onward. I am therefore somewhat skeptical of the assertion in the History of Woman's Suffrage that the women who organized the Seneca Falls Convention had "no experience in the modus operandi of getting up conventions." Mary Ann M'Clintock and her co-workers had a life-time of experience in holding meetings within the Society of Friends, and a more immediate and more relevant experience in organizing anti-slavery fairs, conventions and lectures in the region.

The involvement of the radical Quakers of Waterloo and Rochester in the abolition movement created a major controversy among Quakers. Should paid lecturers be permitted to use Quaker meeting houses? Were the abolitionists relying on mere human knowledge and reason rather than waiting for divine guidance? Were the opponents of war and slavery guilty of
promoting a "warlike spirit" in the country. Were the radicals turning Quaker meetings into debating clubs rather than religious assemblies?

The issue finally divided the Friends of Genesee Yearly Meeting the 1840s was not slavery. Friends were clear that slavery was sinful. It was not strictly speaking the abolition movement, though abolitionism was clearly a causal factor. The issue was whether the corporate authority of the meeting, as centered in the Meetings of Ministers and Elders, had the religious and moral mandate to hinder the individual conscience. What right had an elder to caution a Friend, when that Friend thought his or her activities were the consequence of manifest religious duty?

By 1841, the issue about Quaker involvement with the abolition movement had transformed to a radical critique of Quaker polity. What right did ministers and elders have to caution Friends not to do what some Friends conscientiously believed to be manifest religious duty? How could an elder determine that anti-slavery statements made in a Quaker meeting were motivated by human will and politics rather than religiously motivated. Should Quaker meetings had the authority to discipline or disown members for matters of belief and principle? The radical response, supported by Thomas M'Clintock, Amy Post and others, was to call for the abolition of the "select meetings" of ministers and elders. It was, in essence, a call to dismantle the individual and corporate authority structure of the Society of Friends.

Proposals were made to Genesee Yearly Meeting to discontinue the meetings of ministers and elders as no longer useful. After much discussion in yearly meeting, and after several committees visited the meetings in Michigan, Genesee Yearly Meeting forced the issue in 1847-1848 by requiring the reestablishment of the select meetings in Michigan Quarter. In June 1848, Genesee Yearly Meeting was held in the meeting house at Farmington, New York. Lucretia and James Mott were present. The controversy widened into an actual separation, and the radicals, including the including the M'Clintocks, Hunts, Pryors, DeGarmos and others who would sign the Declaration of Sentiments at the Woman's Rights Convention six weeks later, walked out.

Some historians who have observed the Quaker connection to the Seneca Falls Convention assume that there was some direct link between the events at Farmington in June and the events at Seneca Falls in July. The connection is not explicit. In explaining their actions in withdrawing, the radicals did not mention the status of women as an issue. The general issue of equality had in fact been settled by Friends a decade earlier. There was, however, a common question of external authority. The radicals saw a sisterhood of reforms: just as no slaveowner should have mastery over slaves, and no church structure should limit the spiritual growth of its members, men should not deny to women their natural rights. The Seneca Falls Convention, was, however, a radical departure. The Quaker-Garrisonian network of central New York was hostile to political action but now, presumably at the urging of Stanton, claiming the right of suffrage.

The radicals met again at Farmington in October 1848, and adopted a "Basis of Religious Association" written largely by Thomas M'Clintock. The new organization, the Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, abolished the old system of separate meetings for men and women:

"Not only will the equality of women be recognized, but so perfectly, that in our meetings... men and women will met together and transact business jointly."

Interestingly, the Congregational Friends retained the Quaker practice of co-clerks, one male and the other female, for the annual meeting, they took obvious care that all committees were balanced in gender. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the only non-Quaker among the organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention, attended the organizational meeting of the Congregational Friends at Farmington in October 1848, and gave her first public speech on woman's rights outside of the Waterloo and Rochester conventions at either the Farmington or the Waterloo Friends Meeting House.

The Congregational Friends, renamed the "Friends of Human Progress" in 1854, met annually at the old Junius Quaker Meeting House north-west of Waterloo into the 1880s. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the only non-Quaker of the organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention, found in them a congenial home. Her first public speech after the Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls and that at Rochester in early August was probably delivered at the Junius Meeting House. She participated in the annual meetings and in a letter written to Martha Coffin Wright in April 1856, claimed membership in the Junius Meeting. If such an open and fluid organization as the Friends of Human Progress can be called Quaker, then Stanton's membership in Junius meeting means that all five of the women who organized the First Woman's Rights Convention in 1848 had been, were, or would be, members of the Religious Society of Friends.

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