THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN WESTERN NEW YORK

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The Society of Friends--the Quakers--originated in England about 1652. Within five years Quakerism had spread throughout the British Isles and to the American colonies. Although we associate Friends with Pennsylvania, there were Quaker meetings in New England and New Amsterdam by 1657. This predates the arrival of William Penn in Pennsylvania by twenty-five years.

At the time of the American Revolution, most of New York Quakers lived on Long Island and Manhattan, or the lower Hudson River counties of Westchester and Dutchess, but a few Quakers had already moved north up the Hudson to Saratoga (1775), East Hoosack (1774) and into Vermont. Some of General Burgoyne's Indian allies looked in on Quakers at meeting at Saratoga in 1778 but left the peaceful Quakers untouched.

With the treaty of peace with Britain, Quaker migration north and west began in earnest. In the 1780s, when this part of New York State was still Indian land, Quakers were beginning settlement in Upper Canada (now Ontario). The first Friends in western New York as settlers were probably those from East Hoosack who arrived at Farmington in Ontario County in 1789. Quaker meetings in western New York and Upper Canada were originally part of New York Yearly Meeting. The extent of a yearly meeting was a function of geography and migration patterns rather than political boundaries. At the time of the establishment of the Willink (later East Hamburg) Meeting--the ancestor of the Orchard Park Meeting--New York Yearly Meeting encompassed the portions of Connecticut and Massachusetts west of the Connecticut River, New York State, Vermont and Upper Canada. It helps to imagine the migration of Quakers from Long Island and the lower Hudson up the Hudson River and then eastward into Vermont, west across New York State and north into Canada. Quakers in Vermont were tied more closely to New York Yearly Meeting than to the Quaker meetings of New England Yearly Meeting. Many western New York Friends came from Dutchess County, via Vermont or Canada. A smaller number of Quakers came from New England along the Hudson River route. About a third of the members of Scipio Monthly Meeting in Cayuga County came from the New Bedford, Massachusetts area. Friends from Pennsylvania and New Jersey also came to Western New York. In the 1830s, many local Quakers caught “Michigan Fever” and heading further west. One Quaker meeting in Niagara County moved as a body to the Raisin River in Michigan, taking the minute books of their meeting with them.

Despite the absence of many of the usual forms of church organization, the Society of Friends had a well structured system of meetings for business. Local meetings were “preparative meetings” and two or more preparative meetings constituted a monthly meeting. The monthly meeting conducted most of the business of the Society. It received and disowned members, oversaw marriages, appointed overseers for the preparative meetings and acknowledged ministers and elders. East Hamburg Monthly Meeting included the preparative meetings of East Hamburg, Boston, Orangeville (near Warsaw) and Buffalo. Several adjacent monthly meetings formed a quarterly meeting. East Hamburg was a part of Farmington Quarter which stretched from Seneca County in the east to Cattaraugus County in the west. The several quarterly meetings made up the yearly meeting. The location of the sessions of the monthly and quarterly meetings would alternate within the region. East Hamburg Monthly Meeting could be held in East Hamburg one month and Boston the next. At one time Farmington Quarterly Meeting was held at East Hamburg once a year. Monthly and Quarterly Meetings took on something of a social flavor as East Hamburg Friends traveled to Rochester or Farmington for Quarterly Meeting, or put up visiting Friends from the Junius or Wheatfield Meetings when quarterly meeting was held at home. A Quaker in Erie County might be better acquainted with the affairs of the Quaker communities in Mendon or Macedon than with events much closer to home.

Although any member could speak in meeting, those who demonstrated a particular spiritual gift could be acknowledged as "ministers" by the monthly meeting. It is important to understand the concept of ministry in the Society of Friends. Ministers were "acknowledged" not "ordained". Friends ministers could be of either sex. A local meeting might have several resident ministers, or one, or none. Other "weighty" Friends would be appointed by the monthly meeting as elders. Ministers and elders were looked to for spiritual leadership and sat on the facing benches during meeting for worship. Quaker meetings could be, and often were, held in complete silence without any vocal ministry. Sometimes ministers felt called to make a religious visit to other Friends meetings. Picture a Quaker minister saying, "Husband, I feel a concern to visit Friends in New York and Canada. I hope to be back next Spring or Summer." Many traveling Friends passed through western New York. Elias Hicks, Edward Hicks (the painter of the "Peaceable Kingdom"), Lucretia Mott, Joseph John Gurney, Sunderland P. Gardner and John J. Cornell and numerous others, both famous and obscure, visited meeting houses still standing in western New York.

A disproportionate number of the early leaders of the women’s rights movement as well as many of the first women professionals were Quakers or came from Quaker backgrounds. In the Society of Friends, women could become ministers and elders and speak in meeting. Men and women sat on opposite sides of the meeting house and had separate preparative, monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings. During business meetings shutters were pulled down, dividing the meeting house into two separate compartments. Differences between the men's and women's meetings were resolved by joint committees. The Discipline of Genesee Yearly Meeting, printed in 1842, stated that "men's and women's meetings for discipline stand on equal footing of common interest and common right." The practice of separate men's and women's meetings continued in East Hamburg Monthly Meeting until 1882.
The nineteenth century was a period of religious controversy and Friends were not immune. In the 1820s, differences about doctrine and disciplinary practices resulted in a schism which split most of the yearly meetings in North America. Both sides maintained that they represented the ancient testimonies of the Society of Friends. The labels generally used to differentiate the two branches are "Hicksite" and "Orthodox". The term Hicksite refers to Elias Hicks, a well known Quaker from Jerico, Long Island, whose liberal views troubled the Orthodox Friends. Hicksite Friends were worried that there Orthodox brethren were trying to enforce too much uniformity of belief and that they were trying to write a creed for Quakerism. Orthodox Friends were worried that some of their Hicksite brethren were straying into unbelief and deism. The Orthodox interpreted the writings of William Penn, Robert Barclay, George Fox and other early Friends as firmly within the Christian, i.e. Protestant, tradition. In short, the Orthodox saw the Hicksites become Universalists and Unitarians, and the Hicksites saw the Orthodox as Presbyterians and Episcopalians in Quaker clothing.

At the time of the separation both the Hicksite and Orthodox sides took a census of members. There were about 20,000 Quakers in New York Yearly Meeting with Hicksites in the majority. Farmington Quarter had about 3000 Quakers. In Erie County, the majority of the East Hamburg Meeting went with the Hicksites, while the majority of the Collins meeting were Orthodox.

In the early 1820s, prior to the separation, Friends in Western New York and Ontario proposed the creation of a new yearly meeting. It was difficult for Quakers from East Hamburg and Collins, not to mention Norwich and Yonge Street in Canada, to make the long trip to New York City to attend the sessions of the Yearly Meeting. In 1834, the Hicksite Quakers set up Genesee Yearly Meeting which encompassed Farmington and Scipio Quarterly Meetings in New York State, Upper Canada and Michigan. Again we see the influence of migration. The Friends in Michigan maintained their ties with Western New York although they were closer in distance to Friends in Indiana and Ohio. Orthodox Friends in western New York were always part of New York Yearly Meeting (Orthodox). Canada Yearly Meeting (Orthodox) was set off from New York Yearly Meeting in 1867.

In the 1830s and 1840s some of the more radical members of Genesee Yearly Meeting came to see the existence of ministers and elders as being against the spirit of the Society of Friends. In a Society which proclaimed that all had direct access to the inner light, what was the necessity of setting up this form of spiritual hierarchy? If Friends were to follow the leadings of the spirit, what right had the meeting to pass judgment on individual conduct and belief of sincere Friends? In 1848, the issue split Genesee Yearly Meeting. Some of the radicals left the Yearly Meeting and established a group called the Friends of Human Progress which met annually at Junius, near Waterloo, New York. Many of these Friends who were calling for absolute spiritual equality were among the signers of the Declaration of the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention one month later.

A Friends of Human Progress group was established at Collins in 1855. Unlike the group which met at Junius, the Collins Annual Meeting adopted Spiritualism as one of the great progressive reforms of the age. For years reformers including the likes of Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Stanton came to Collins for the annual meeting and shared the speakers' platform with spiritualist mediums. At the annual meeting 1857, held at the Hicksite meeting house which still stands on Route 60 a mile south of North Collins, Susan B. Anthony disputed the nature of women with spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis. Davis maintained that women should be given rights because they were morally superior to men. Anthony was a firm believer in the equality of men and women. At least some members or former members of the East Hamburg meeting were involved with this group. Griffin M. Cooper was one. The Collins Annual Meeting of the Friends of Human Progress met until World War 1 and perhaps later. They continued as an incorporated body until the 1930s.

Some conservative or "Wilburite" Friends separated from the orthodox body in the 1840s but that split was largely confined to Scipio Quarterly Meeting in central New York and Ferrisburg Quarterly Meeting in Vermont and does not seem to have affected Quakers in Erie county. By the end of the 19th century, Orthodox and Hicksite Friends were beginning to cooperate on joint projects although the final reunification of the Orthodox, Hicksite and Wilburite branches in New York Yearly Meeting and Canada Yearly Meeting was not completed until 1955.

Quakers saw themselves as a "peculiar people" set apart from other people by their belief and practices. Yet the Society of Friends did not withdraw from the world as did the Amish and some of the other groups from the anabaptist tradition. It would be a mistake to see the Society of Friends as closed. Many of those who attended Quaker meeting for worship were not members and many members were convinced Friends who joined as adults rather than birthright members. Quaker distinctiveness was both visual and audible. Consistent Friends wore plain dress, with no jewelry, frills or laces. By the mid 18th century, this plainness of dress, which originated as a testimony against the "vain and changeable fashions of the world" had become a badge of distinction. Wearing the plain coat and broad brimmed hat-- the image of the Quakers we see today on the Quaker Oats box represented a commitment to uphold Quaker testimonies. It would have been inconceivable to see a plain Friend frequenting taverns, horse races, dances, the theater or other places of vain amusement. I do not mean to suggest the dour, plain-coated Quaker kill-joy. Quaker amusements were more along the line of gardening, reading serious works, teas, conversations and sewing circles. Quakers also used the "plain language": "thee" and "thy" instead of "you" and "your" in the second person singular, a strict regard for the literal truth when making statements and often a rather biblical turn of phrase. Quakers also did not use the names of the days of the week or of the months which were derived from pagan deities. Instead of Monday (the name derives from Moon's Day), April (the name derives from Aphrodite) 8th, Friends said: "I hope to see thee on second day, the eighth of Fourth Month in East Hamburg at Quarterly Meeting".

But Quaker "distinctiveness" was not only a matter of outward behavior. Quakers were expected to uphold a standard of behavior and religious testimonies. Four times a year, the "advices and queries" were read in meeting, and each meeting examined whether its members had been successful in adhering to Quaker testimonies. The First Query asked "Are Friends careful to attend all our meetings for religious worship and discipline...and are they clear of sleeping and all other unbecoming behavior in them?" The Second asked, "Are love and unity maintained as becomes brethren ...?" The Seventh
asked, "Are Friends clear of bearing arms, of complying with any military requisition, any paying of any fine or tax in lieu thereof?. Quakers in western New York were imprisoned from time to time for refusing to appear for militia duty. A Quaker whose goods or horses were impressed by the military during the Revolution or the War of 1812 could not accept payment for them. Going to court against one's neighbors was also not considered appropriate Quaker behavior. Those that did not follow Quaker practice were treated with and, if they did not admit the error of their ways, were disowned.

In the 1830s and 1840s, many Friends in Farmington Quarter, both Hicksite and Orthodox were actively involved in the anti-slavery cause. Friends were cautioned against the purchase of any goods—such as cotton cloth and sugar—produced by slave labor, to purge themselves from all participation in wrong of slavery and to bear their "testimony against it on every hand." At Collins, a Free Produce Association was established to enable Friends and others committed to the anti-slavery cause to purchase goods made by free labor.

East Hamburg was located between the Buffalo Creek and the Cattaraugus Reservations. In 1790, representatives of the Seneca Nation had approached Quakers in Philadelphia for assistance in the education of their children. Out of this initial contact came a relationship between the Seneca and Friends in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In 1798, Quakers came to the Allegheny Reservation and began what would become the Friends school. For a brief period of time, there were schools at the Cattaraugus Reservation under the care of Friends. Unlike other denominations, the intent of these Friends was the education of the Indians in the ways of modern agriculture and industry. Of perhaps more ultimate importance to the Seneca was Quaker assistance to those Indians opposing the Buffalo Creek Treaty of 1839 which would have sold all Seneca Land in New York and removed the bulk of the Seneca Indians to Wisconsin. Although the Buffalo Creek Reservation was lost to the Seneca, the Reservations of Allegheny and Cattaraugus were preserved. A leading figure in the opposition to the Buffalo Creek Treaty was Philip Thomas, a Quaker from Baltimore. The Thomas Indian School at Cattaraugus was named for him.

After 1830, the number of Friends in western New York began to decline. There were probably a number of reasons for the decline: the separations, disownments, migration out of the region and the loss of Quakers to other denominations. Some of our best Methodists were Friends. By 1890, some were beginning to wonder whether western New York Quakerism—particularly of the Hicksite variety? would survive. Also during the later half of the nineteenth century the outward appearance of Quakers changed. Most Quakers dropped the plain dress and plain speech as badges of distinction although the underlying idea of plainness and simplicity remained. In some of the Orthodox meetings, the modernization of the 1860s and 1870s meant adopting some of the more typical church forms of worship: the use of music and singing in meeting, pastors and a set order of service.

The decline of Quakerism was ultimately reversed and in the 1920s and 1930s meetings were established or reestablished at places like Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. Neither the Society of Friends or Western New York is precisely what it once was but both have built on the traditions, accomplishments and failures, of those that had gone before us.

[For further information, see Hugh Barbour, et. al. Quaker Crosscurrents: Three Hundred Years of the New York Yearly Meetings. Syracuse University Press, 1995]