
Our Quaker Ancestors: Their History and the Records They Left

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Introduction

The Society of Friends, or Quakers as they are popularly known, was founded by George Fox in Leicestershire, England, in 1644 as a radical form of Christianity in opposition to the established church. Quakers were persecuted in England, and later in New England, but they came to America in large numbers in order to practice their religion without interference.

Quakers believed (and still believe) in a personal relationship with God through an inner light that each person innately possesses. Early Quakers had no clergy and tended to be more tolerant of individual differences in worship. They also rejected civil laws that conflicted with their beliefs.

Quakers believed in the spiritual equality of men and women and often allowed women to take leadership roles in the society. They also rejected the notion that Native Americans were savages and that enslaved African Americans were spiritually inferior. Though some early American Quakers owned slaves, Friends came to be strongly opposed to slavery.

Plain living was the watchword of the Quakers, and they strove to follow “temperance, a minimum of entertainments, fairness in all commercial dealings, peace under all conditions, and especially the fear of the Lord.”¹

Quaker Meetings

Quakers do not have priests and bishops, but they do have a hierarchy organized geographically around “meetings.” The local meeting is similar to a parish in that it is where the local community of Friends assembles each week for worship. Several local meetings gather local business matters for presentation at the Monthly Meeting. Until about 1880, there were usually, but not always, men’s meetings and women’s monthly meetings. The next level is the Quarterly Meeting where representatives of several Monthly Meetings gather each quarter year for

¹ Zora Klain, “Quaker Contributions to Education in North Carolina” (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 1924), 18; digitized thesis, *HathiTrust* ([https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b59255;view=1up;seq=7](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b59255;view=1up;seq=7)).

business. The Quarterly Meetings send representatives to the Yearly Meeting, which covers a geographical region (often a state) encompassing the lower-level meetings. For more information on Quaker theology and practices, see the “Resources” section of this syllabus.

Quaker Migrations

Quaker settlement began in northeastern North America, especially in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Some early Quakers migrated by water to coastal areas of North Carolina. Some migrated west along land routes used by many other settlers. However, the majority of Quakers migrated south along the Great Wagon Road into the Shenandoah Valley and on to the interior of North Carolina. After the Friends came to believe slavery was incompatible with their beliefs, they began to migrate northwest to western Pennsylvania and the newly-opened areas of the Old Northwest Territories in Ohio and Indiana.

Early Quakers in the Midwest

Migration of Friends to the Midwest began in the 1790s, with some of the settlers coming from Pennsylvania, but the majority coming from Virginia and North and South Carolina. One significant motivation for the movement of Southern Quakers to the Midwest was to escape the hostility of their neighbors over their opposition to slavery. Many Midwestern Quakers were active in the Underground Railroad in the years before the Civil War, helping enslaved people escape to Canada.

Quaker Records

Quakers kept detailed minutes of their business meetings. “It appears the entire Quaker movement was based upon committee actions, for no part of Quaker life escaped the close scrutiny of a committee.”² Information on births and deaths can be found in monthly meeting registers, and monthly meeting minutes include records of marriages, migration, and disciplinary action. “Even though the Quakers had no official creed, the organization expected members to live by a discipline dictated by the yearly meeting.”³ When a member was accused of an infraction, a committee was appointed to investigate, and the results of the investigation were reported to the appropriate meeting. Meeting minutes contain many details of the lives of individual Quakers. Certificates of removal, issued when an individual or family moved from the jurisdiction of one monthly meeting to another, can help place ancestors in a new location as they migrated.

Finding the Records

Ancestry has the largest collection of digitized Quaker records. Some are also available on FamilySearch. Many are still undigitized and held in repositories ranging from Quaker colleges and other university libraries to historical societies and museums in areas with historically large

² Ellen Thomas Berry & David Allen Barry, *Our Quaker Ancestors: Finding Them in Quaker Records* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1987), 46.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

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Quaker populations. We find the digitized records of our Quaker ancestors by using QuakerMeetings.com and The Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy (“Hinshaw”) in combination with the card catalogs at Ancestry and FamilySearch. Not-yet-digitized records can also be found by using Hinshaw and QuakerMeetings.com together.

Online Quaker Genealogy Discussion Group

If you’re interested in reaching out to other Quaker researchers and participating in discussions on Quaker genealogy, I recommend the Quaker Roots discussion group on *groups.io*. Quaker researchers of all skill levels belong to the group and the discussions are very helpful.

Resources

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Quaker Days of the Week	Month	Called before 1752	Called during and after 1752
Sunday – First Day	January	Eleventh	First
Monday – Second Day	February	Twelfth	Second
Tuesday – Third Day	March	First	Third
Wednesday – Fourth Day	April	Second	Fourth
Thursday – Fifth Day	May	Third	Fifth
Friday – Sixth Day	June	Fourth	Sixth
Saturday – Seventh Day	July	Fifth	Seventh
	August	Sixth	Eighth
	September	Seventh	Ninth
	October	Eighth	Tenth
	November	Ninth	Eleventh
	December	Tenth	Twelfth