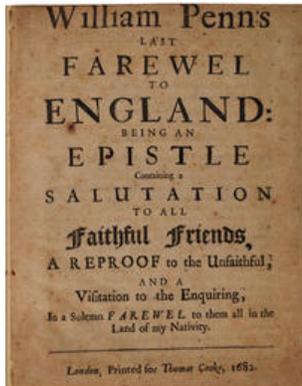


# The Origins and Legacy of the Pennsylvania Quakers

by Barry Levy



Enthusiastic religious conviction among rustic Quakers contributed much to what seems civilized and refined about American culture and society. Although the movement later attracted intellectual and genteel members, Quakerism began as a folk religion among obscure farmers and dairymaids in upland England in the late 1640s and 1650s. In 1649, following a decade-long civil war, the puritans tried King Charles I for treason, convicted him, and cut off his head. They abolished the English monarchy as well as the established church. Oliver Cromwell, the puritan ruler, proclaimed toleration for all varieties of Protestantism. He and the winning Protestant reformers believed that individuals and society could be revived and justified by people freely reading the Bible (the Word of God) and especially listening to sermonic explications of the Old and New Testament by trained ministers. Only in this way could English people understand what Christ did for them, develop faith, and obtain the Holy Spirit, thereby achieving salvation as individuals—and as a nation.

Puritanical laity in remote places (“the dark corners of the land” as they were then often described) lacked university-trained ministers and grew frustrated attempting to model themselves and their society on the literary tableaux recommended to them. George Fox, Elizabeth Hooten, Margaret Fell, and James Naylor among others

in the north came to believe that the Scriptures were God’s Word but that the Holy Spirit was also born into every person as a consequence of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Thus all people, they believed, might be renewed directly by the inward light of Christ, which is the author of the Scriptures and would lead individuals and the world into all truth.

With this revelation, instead of focusing on inaccessible sermons and expensive churches, northwest British Quakers relied on radically spiritualized intimate relations. The major Quaker form of worship was simply a meeting of people in which one individual, after a period of silence and inner attention, would access the Holy Spirit or the Light and it would spread among the group “as one hot coal heats another.” Sometimes the person or others affected would speak spontaneously and involuntarily. Having been visited by the Light or Holy Spirit so directly, individuals would sometimes shake. Thus, while they called themselves the Friends or Children of Light, critics called them Quakers, a name they accepted to show that they refused to allow the carnal assessments of “the world” to faze them.

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Being reborn from the inside out by the Holy Spirit, the early Quakers developed radical and dangerous ideas about language and society. They thought that once a person was animated by the Light or Holy Spirit within, he or she became equivalent to the Word of God and, much like the Bible, communicated the Holy Spirit to others. The idea that a converted person must embody and radiate God’s Word led to socially uncouth ideas and behaviors, some that later became adopted by seculars. As embodiments of the Word, Quakers could never lie. Thus, they refused to haggle in the market or, in other words, to play with untrue prices; so they invented the set price for goods. The Quakers decided that men and women both communicated God’s Word, so women were encouraged to talk or preach in meeting if animated by the Holy Spirit, and the Quakers were the first religious group to have female ministers.

George Fox, the Quaker leader, discovered that in the Bible “thee” and “thou” were singular pronouns, and “you” was plural. As a result, Quakers addressed every individual, including judges or magistrates, as “thee” or “thou” even though (or perhaps because) the custom at the time was to reserve such usage for servants, children, and lovers. They also refused to bow or doff their hats to other humans, an honor due only to God, but instead upon meeting grabbed each others’ hands to feel the pulsing of the Light—and the egalitarian handshake was invented. Following the seventeenth-century notion that “conversation” meant the whole way a person related to society, the Quakers did not confine their ideas about language to just words but to all aspects of behavior. As a result, they developed an aesthetic in clothes and architecture based on simplicity, following the idea that anything superfluous or not authorized by the Word of the Bible or the Word of inner revelation was carnal and sinful.<sup>1</sup>

After Oliver Cromwell died, the army restored the monarchy in 1660 and the enthusiastic and pesky Quakers became the focus of severe state persecution. Some historians have argued persuasively that it was the rise of the Quakers in Cromwell’s regime that convinced the gentry and English establishment that the Puritan experiment needed to be stopped immediately.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the case, the hostile new regime forced Quakers to concentrate on survival.

While their very existence was at issue, they continued to be creative and to influence society, especially the English and American family. Under the leadership of George Fox and Margaret Fell, the Restoration Quakers focused on retaining their children within the faith and organizing for the long haul. They understood that children, though affected by original sin, were also born with the Holy Spirit or Light and that, if raised within an atmosphere and networks of “holy conversation,” they would likely become vessels of the truth. Thus the Quakers invented men’s and women’s monthly meetings whose main job was to ensure that every Quaker marriage and household featured a vital relationship between a man and woman of holy conversation. Indeed Fox and Fell, who married each other, weathered a schism after they insisted that every man who married had to have his fiancée inspected by a committee of spiritually wise women, granting women for the first time in modern European history the

power to dictate the basic character of other women.

Quakers also emphasized gentle, non-coercive child rearing, rejecting the idea popular among Puritans that “breaking the will” of the child or traumatizing him or her was helpful. This policy meant that they did not follow the common English habit of sending children away when they reached fourteen years to gain the best apprenticeship or position available. In order to provide for their retentive family structure, Quakers needed more resources than a puritan or Anglican family might. In order to pay for these innovations, many Quakers focused on moneymaking. In England, they produced major capitalist institutions, including Barclays and Lloyd’s Bank, and Cadbury Chocolate, and led many of the metal-producing industries. Many northwestern Quakers fled to America, however, where these once-persecuted Quakers became rich and influential immigrants as they developed good and cheap land in the Delaware Valley and established the wheat trade.<sup>3</sup>

Quakers never composed more than one percent of the English population. For a relatively brief time, during the colonial period, they did command a meaningful percentage of white Americans. This brief flowering was due largely to William Penn, an aristocratic Quaker convert, who got the gift of Pennsylvania from Charles II and who fashioned it into a Quaker refuge. Quaker farmers from northwestern England developed the Delaware Valley into profitable wheat farms, made peace with the local American Indians, had large and successful families of tender relations, ruled the colony in the powerful Pennsylvania Assembly, attracted a diverse group of immigrants, built a great and pluralistic city in Philadelphia, supported a religious civil society without an established church or an army. Enlightenment thinkers in Europe came to see Pennsylvania as the flowering of a new golden age.

The colony became idealized by poor European laborers as “the best poor man’s country,” and thus began the idea of America as a land that would attract cheap labor by appealing to the dreams of the common person.<sup>4</sup> Despite all this success, the Quakers’ inability to share power with new groups caused a major political catastrophe in Pennsylvania in the 1760s and 1770s following conflict with American Indians. Though William Penn and the Quakers initially treated the Indians well, eventually Quaker families’ need for land conflicted with Native interests. Land hunger grew when the colony’s labor force came to rely on Scotch-Irish immigrants and European servants who expected land after their terms of service were completed. Angered by what they considered illicit land grabs, the Delaware Indians in 1756 attacked the Pennsylvania frontier. The colonists squabbled over the proper response. As a consequence, the province fell into civil war as the diversity of religious and ethnic groups came to stigmatize each other. The situation was exacerbated with the coming of the American Revolution, as many pacifist Quakers tried to remain neutral. The sect collapsed politically as Quakers lost members and status.<sup>5</sup>

As Americans moved west, the Quaker silent meeting and the Quakers’ heightened emphasis on purified families proved less effective tools of Christianization than energetic preaching. Numerically, the west and America as a whole soon belonged to the evangelical Christians—the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists. The Quakers themselves suffered a schism as one faction decided to emphasize preaching, while the other faction held to the old ways of the silent meeting.<sup>6</sup> Quakers who did move west were ill equipped to deal with some aspects of life on the frontier, especially violence against Native peoples.

Though the relative number of Quakers never revived, their influence and that of the Delaware Valley did. Puritan women adopted and recommended the Quaker family and female role, especially as witnessed in the Delaware Valley. Quakers became centerpieces of American domesticity, a massive reform movement to make the mother the ethical center of American socialization and of a gentler childhood in home and school.<sup>7</sup> See Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Louisa May Alcott’s *Work* for Yankee idealizations of the Quaker family. Other Quaker ideas like abolitionism and pacifism also became influential among New England intellectuals. As a consequence, and because they were used to formal power and public speech, Quaker-bred women like Lucretia Mott, Jane Addams, Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony, and Alice Paul came to almost dominate ethical reform movements and the ranks of America’s public women despite the tiny percentage of Quaker women in the population.<sup>8</sup> The ethical weight of the Quaker family and these women even added luster to Quaker men, including the imaginary but reassuring man on the Quaker Oats box. Surprisingly, given the group’s small population, two presidents in the twentieth century, Herbert Hoover and Richard M. Nixon, were Quakers. However, like their Pennsylvania ancestors, these Quaker politicians had trouble retaining their popularity.

Thanks to continual revelations (testimonies) of the Holy Spirit, the Quakers sponsored not only radical ideas like abolitionism and pacifism but also initiatives that contributed significantly to mainstream American cultural traits like the belief that traumatizing children is an evil idea and that each child contains a divine spirit; that women should be at least equal to men in public secular and religious forums; that religious toleration is beneficial; that slavery is evil and had to be ended immediately; and that a handshake is a better greeting than a groveling bow or a curtsy. Pacifism has not been adopted in practice, though even American defense advocates claim that they are pursuing peace, including those at the Hoover Institution, named for the Quaker President above. It is important to note that such truths were first revealed to and communicated effectively by obscure religious fanatics of the British hill country.

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1 See Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence Among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

2 See Barry Reay, *Quakers and the English Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

3 See Richard and Mary Dunn, eds., *The World of William Penn* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); J. William Frost, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973).

4 See Marianne Wokeck, *Trade in Strangers: The Beginnings of Mass Migration to North America* (University Park: Penn State University Press,

1999).

5 See Jane Calvert, *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors* (New York: Norton, 2008); Kevin Kenny, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

6 Thomas D. Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988).

7 For domesticity, see Kathryn Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

8 See the number of Quakers in Edward T. James et al, eds., *Notable American Women, 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

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**Barry Levy**, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is the author of *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley, 1650-1780* (1988) and *Town Born: The Political Economy of New England Towns from Their Settlement to the Revolution* (2009). He is currently working on a sequel to his research on the political economy of New England towns, tentatively called the "problem of Massachusetts in the British and American Empires, 1690–1820."

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#### METADATA

**Era:** Colonization and Settlement, 1585-1763, The American Revolution, 1763-1783

**Sub Era:** Early Settlements, The Road to Revolution, Religion and Eighteenth-Century Revivalism, The Thirteen Colonies

**Theme:** Immigration and Migration, Reform Movements, Religion, Women's History

**Curriculum Subject:** Government and Civics, Religion and Philosophy

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