

The Quakers in Southwestern Pennsylvania by David Cressey

*No more laughing, no more fun
Quaker Meeting has begun*

The colony of Pennsylvania was the proprietary property of **William Penn**, established in 1681 according to the principles of the Religious Society of Friends, of whom Penn was one. By 1765, when the settlement of Southwestern Pennsylvania commenced, Penn had departed this life and Pennsylvania as an exercise in Friendly, or Quaker, governance had experienced enormous evolutions. Quaker influence in this southwestern region is slight, but nevertheless a story worth telling.

A brief history of the Friends: in 1643, in the midst of the English Civil War, a 19-year-old named **George Fox** was compelled to search his soul. The war, which involved questions of religious policy as well as of governance, was particularly grisly. Fox emerged from his extended sojourn with a religious vision that emphasized pacifism (“the peaceful resolution of conflict”), a protocol of consensus building and toleration, respect for the natural world, and a commitment to plain living absent ostentation or “show.”

The Society of Friends had attracted substantial numbers by 1656 (the War ended in 1653), particularly in Wales and Northern Ireland, William Penn joining in 1666. Dubbed “Quakers” (a reference to the trembling enthusiasm of some early adherents) by the skeptical, the Friends eventually came to embrace the slur. Followers of Christ and Biblical teachings, they devised a unique manner of worship. They called their churches Meetinghouses, which were of simple brick, stone or wood construction, devoid of steeples or ornamentation. They had no preachers. In a Quaker Meeting anyone in attendance is free to address the others, the premise being that he or she is channeling the divine, the words to be shared--and understanding refined--among the group present. Out of silence comes the voice of God.

The Friends were relatively early to fully adopt the precept that “all men are created equal.” (In Quaker parlance, the “inner light” of God resides in every individual.) Though some of the first Quaker colonists owned slaves, and early Meetinghouses were partitioned into separate sections for men and women, by 1740 the Quakers were solidly opposed to slavery and were affording women opportunities and standing outside the norm. Famously, Penn signed a treaty with the Indians at the outset and made a sincere effort, though flawed, to negotiate and maintain agreements in good faith.

Early Friends, including Fox and Penn, were often imprisoned for their beliefs. One theory is that Penn was given such a large swath of the New World in hopes that ALL Quakers would relocate there and thus relieve the King of a major headache. Ultimately, the French and Indian War (1754-1763) ended Quaker control of Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Assembly, mandated to have a majority from the Society of Friends, could not come to an agreement as to how to defend the western frontier, including present-day Greene County. Most of the Quakers on the Assembly stepped aside rather than abrogate their pacifist ideals and finance a war. In 1763, in one of the signature moments of Pennsylvania colonial history, the “**Paxton Boys**”--

threatened by Pontiac's uprising in the wake of the war—slaughtered twenty unarmed Indian women, children and elderly in Conestoga. They then marched as an armed rabble on Philadelphia, gunning for Quakers as well as Indians. In one of the more dramatic examples of “peaceful resolution of conflict,” **Benjamin Franklin** stepped in to save the day and prevent further atrocities.

Individual Quakers were present in Southwestern Pennsylvania from the start. “Uniontown was settled about 1767 by **Thomas Douthet** and **Henry Beeson**, the latter a Quaker blacksmith and miller...[there was a] nucleus of Quakers living near Brownsville and Uniontown as early as 1776...The site of the town of Somerset was occupied about 1771 by several hunter-farmers, including **Harmon Husband**, a Quaker.” (Buck, *The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania*, pages 150-151.)

When Pennsylvania and Virginia settled their boundary dispute in 1780, Pennsylvania making provisions for the gradual emancipation of slavery, many of the Virginia-bred landowners (now deemed Pennsylvanians) sold and headed to Kentucky. Among those seizing the opportunity to buy sizable frontier tracts on favorable terms were groups of Quakers. *Leckey* (see page 50) locates such a group on the south branch of the Tenmile, near Clarksville, before the end of the Revolutionary War. Included were **Blackledges, Hoges, Strawns, Bursons, VanBuskirks, Garwoods, and Adamsons**.

Bridgeport, across Dunlap Creek from Brownsville, was settled predominantly by Quakers who were well established there by about 1790. In 1799, three acres were purchased from **Rees Cadwalader** and a stone Meetinghouse (Redstone) was built. A stone schoolhouse was also built that year by the Friends, the first school in Bridgeport. The first teachers were **Joseph Oxley** and **Eli Haynes**. Two prominent Quakers in the Brownsville area were **Samuel Jackson** and **Jonathan Sharpless**. They were ingenious mechanics and, in 1796, planned and erected the Redstone Paper Mill, the first paper mill west of the Alleghenies. Jackson had, as early as 1780, operated a sizable saw and grist mill at the mouth of Redstone Creek. Sharpless married **Edith Nichols** and their daughter, **Elizabeth**, married Samuel and **Rebecca Jackson**'s son, **Jesse**. The intermarried families operated the paper mill into the 1830s. (Helen Vogt, *Westward of Ye Laurall Hills*, pages 98, 414-419.)

By 1785, the Westlands Friends Meeting—in East Bethlehem Township, Washington County, not far from Clarksville—was established. A 186 acre tract of land was purchased and a stone Meetinghouse constructed in 1792. One of the trustees involved in the 1790 purchase of the land was **Isaac Jenkinson**, a well-known surveyor and “artist” who was also a trustee (and original lot holder) when Greene County was formed in 1796; presumably, he was a Quaker. As the 1790s progressed, other Friends Meetings took root in Washington County, organized as part of the Redstone Quarterly Meeting. The Pike Run Meeting in West Pike Run Township built a frame Meetinghouse in 1797. The Head of Wheeling Meeting was started in East Finley Township, also in 1797. The Fallowfield Meeting began in 1799. In 1799, travelling Friends from western Pennsylvania had visited North Carolina and impressed upon the Quakers there the opportunities across the Ohio River, a territory where slavery was not permitted. The following year, regular movements of Carolina Friends—not able to live in clear conscience in a slave state—stopped

over at the Westlands Meeting for a time, preparatory to re-settling in what was to become eastern Ohio. (*Our Ancestors, The Stantons*, pages 108-113.)

The only Friends Meeting that we can document in Greene County has its origins in a deed recorded November 28, 1808, whereby **Thomas Miller** conveys to the Society of Friends, represented by **John Hank(s)** and **Mahlon Hartley**, one acre and twenty perches “for the purpose of building a Meetinghouse on, and burying ground.” Consideration: \$2.00. The tract is at the headwaters of Muddy Creek atop a hill dividing Cumberland and Greene Townships, on property now owned by Earl L. Mackey. The Meeting was known as “Ridge,” or sometimes “Muddy Creek,” and the hill itself is called by some “Quaker Ridge.” Thomas Miller’s will of June 4, 1840 makes provision “to pay four dollars yearly to keep in Repair Friend Ridge meeting house”.

We have an undated handwritten letter from **Neri G. Hart** (1895-1986)—from a pioneer family and much interested in local history--to **Dorothy Hennen**. Mr. Hart calls the spot “Quaker Meetinghouse Hill.” He identifies **Nathaniel Temple** (1747-1842), who had a farm near Fordyce, as one of the early Quakers in the area. Temple’s Quakerism is noted in *Leckey*, who also notes that Temple was a Revolutionary War soldier, an indication that pacifism was not always possible on the frontier. (Another example is County namesake Nathaniel Greene, raised a Friend in Rhode Island before becoming one of George Washington’s top generals.) Mr. Hart lists the following as members of the Ridge Meeting: **William Morgan, Jacob Burge, Shedlock Negus, Joseph Gregg, William Miller, Isaac Johnson, Jonathan Jonathan, Joseph Cope, Joseph Kersey and the Baily, Gwynn, Blaker, Barclay, Crafty, and Hufty families.**

A copy of an 1826 map in our possession shows the following names of area Meetings (and number of members): Ridge (39), Westland (267), Pike Run (96), Head of Wheeling (23), and Redstone (186). Fallowfield does not appear. There are three other Meetings listed in the vicinity of Brownsville (Redstone), Fayette County: Providence--near Perryopolis--(100), Sandy Hill (59), and Center (45). The total number of Friends in southwestern Pennsylvania in 1826 is calculated as 927. They are organized as part of the Ohio Yearly Meeting in Salem.

The Ridge/Muddy Creek Meeting appears to have petered out about 1850. The log Meetinghouse has been lost to history, and the Hennens found no markers on the site of the cemetery when they investigated in 1977. The stones for **Hannah Baily** and **Amanda Jackson**, once part of that cemetery, reside underneath the barn at the Greene County Historical Society. And, disappointingly, there is no real evidence linking Greene County Friends to the Underground Railroad, though Quakers were heavily involved elsewhere and the County sits squarely on top of the Mason-Dixon Line. The Friends are noted as excellent record keepers (and staunch sponsors of schools), but we find no records for the Ridge Meeting.

The Washington County meetings, too, were declining. Fallowfield was not included on the 1826 map detailed above. (Some sources claim it hung on until 1849.) Head of Wheeling (East Finley), which had a log Meetinghouse, held its last meeting on July 14, 1841. (Forrest, *History of Washington County*, page 593.) Pike Run lasted until 1851, according to Forrest. Finally, the Westlands meeting was “laid down” in 1864, its last meeting held the 21st day of the fourth month. Members were transferred to the Salem, Ohio Monthly Meeting. The property was sold in 1866 and the Meetinghouse was allowed to deteriorate. The well-kept burying ground

remains, and its Quaker section includes over 700 interments. A listing of those that can be identified is found in *The Keyhole* (Genealogical Society of Southwestern Pennsylvania): vol. 3, #4; pages 155-156).

One of our two Quaker Presidents, **Richard Nixon** (Herbert Hoover was the other) has ties to the area. Nixon's 4th great-grandparents—**Anthony and Lydia Willets Smith**—were received at Westlands Meeting on 22 August 1795 and took up residence not far from what is now Waynesburg. Their daughter **Judith** married the John Hank(s) who accepted the land for the Ridge Meetinghouse. In all, 3 generations of Nixon's forebears lived for a time in Greene County (Raymond Bell, *The Ancestry of Richard Milhous Nixon*).

By the end of the Civil War, then, organized Quakerdom was gone in Greene and Washington Counties. There were a number of causes. Like many of the Protestant denominations, the Friends experienced a schism. Elias Hicks split the membership into Hicksite and Orthodox factions, 1827-1829, with his emphases on a "question" that placed ultimate judgment closer to the here and now than in an afterlife. The Friends, though fierce in their beliefs, were generally reluctant to impose those views on others, including their own children; they tended more Libertarian than Evangelical. The focus of movement shifted quickly westward, to Ohio and Indiana, pulling many of the southwestern Pennsylvania Friends to the more vibrant Quaker communities in those States.

One of the last instances of documented Quakerdom in Greene County involves **Samuel H. Headley** (1838-1901). *Bates*, in 1888, identifies him and "his son religiously as Friends." Headley was a shop keeper and post master in Pine Bank. We are in possession of his hand-written journal of 1880-1886 which is delineated in the Friends fashion ("3 day 3 mo. 24," for example, translates as Tuesday, March 24th). According to Jim Hoy, who donated the journal, Headley became a Quaker in 1862 while teaching in Aleppo Township. "He moved to Canada on March 12, 1863 rather than be drafted into the Union Army." The journal entries range from notes on the weather and shop-keeping minutiae to wrestling with philosophical concerns. Headley mentions his son, **Robert B.**, attending a Friends boarding school in Barnesville, Ohio. (Robert's obituary in 1918 identifies him as belonging to the Methodist-Episcopal church.) In all of Bates's over 700 mini-biographies, we can find no others identified as a Friend.

One wonders what it was like for Mr. Headley as a lone supplicant, no Meetings nearby, the Last Quaker in Greene County. Presumably, he traveled to Ohio on occasion to be with fellow Friends. We recall the decentralized nature of the faith, its mystical aspect. In theory, a Quaker Meeting can take place anywhere at any time. A group, however small, gathers and ponders the Questions, however large, and attempts an understanding among themselves, guided by a Higher Being. And we recall that it started with a lone nineteen-year-old in the English countryside of Pendle Hill who was not content to accept the broken world of his elders.