

AN OLD QUAKER BURIAL GROUND IN BARBADOS

During the second half of the seventeenth century and early part of the eighteenth there was a sizable Quaker community in Barbados, some of whom were converted by missionaries to the island, others being convinced by their neighbours or being already Quakers when they came. Ann Austin and Mary Fisher were the first missionaries in 1655; later visitors to the island included George Fox, William Edmundson, and Thomas Story.

The Quakers in Barbados included several plantation owners, such as Thomas Pilgrim whose house eventually became the residence of the Governors of Barbados, and the Rous family, one of whom married Margaret Fell's daughter. Also prominent were such families as Weekes, Gittens, Morris, and Fretwell. However, the refusal of Quakers to take oaths meant that they were excluded from official positions in government. It was not until 1723, when relatively few Quakers remained, that an act was passed permitting affirmation instead of taking the oath.

Quakers were mistrusted by the Governors and by the Anglican clergy and the plantocracy, who saw them as a threat to the established order, and laws were passed in an effort to suppress them. Although Friends owned slaves, who were considered vital for the running of plantations, they felt that slaves should be educated and should be able to attend Meetings for Worship.

A law was passed in 1676 titled "An Act to Prevent the People called Quakers from bringing Negroes to their Meeting".¹ It stated that any slaves brought to meetings would be forfeited by their owners; half of their value would be awarded to the informer and half to the government. In an attempt to prevent the education of slaves the act specified that school teachers had to take an oath of allegiance; the penalty for contravention being three months imprisonment and the forfeit of 3,000 pounds of sugar.

Members of the establishment accused the Quakers of teaching the slaves to rebel, and this was strongly refuted in a "Letter to the Governor of Barbados" of 1671, attributed to George Fox and others. The letter stated, "This wicked slander (of our endeavouring to make the Negroes rebel) our adversaries took occasion to raise, from our having some meetings amongst the Negroes; for we had several meetings with them in divers plantations, wherein we exhorted them

to justice, sobriety, temperance, chastity, and piety, and to be subject to their masters and governors".²

Another contentious issue was the militia. A strong militia had been established for defence of the island and to prevent slave insurrections, and the pacifist convictions of Friends meant that many of them were unwilling to serve in the militia or to pay taxes which were used for that purpose.

A number of Militia Acts were passed, under which Quakers who refused to comply were heavily fined. Joseph Besse in "Sufferings of the People Called Quakers" gives lists of some of the fines imposed on Quakers, rich and poor alike, not only for refusal to serve in the militia and to support the maintenance of forts, but also for refusal to pay taxes in support of the Anglican church and for contravening the Sunday and holiday closing laws. In one particularly onerous period between 1674 and 1680, the fines imposed on Quakers amounted to 611,341 pounds of sugar.³

In spite of antipathy over education and treatment of slaves, and over service in the militia, there were still circumstances in which Friends were able to live peaceably and to a certain extent to prosper.

There were six established Meetings, the approximate site of some of which is still known. All of the Meeting Houses eventually fell into disrepair or were finally destroyed by the hurricane of 1780. A burial ground was associated with at least one of the Meeting Houses, which was near Speightstown on the west coast. Friends also met in each other's houses, and were often buried near their homes.

By the mid-eighteenth century there were few Quakers remaining; some had emigrated because of the primitive conditions, some had succumbed to epidemics, and the descendants of the remainder gradually ceased membership. In 1846 the burial ground near Speightstown was deeded by heirs of the Quakers to the Anglican Church and is now part of St. Peter's Parish cemetery. A Quaker burial ground in the Parish of St. Michael near the Governor's residence is recorded with a stone marker and a plaque.

The third known burial ground, possibly on land owned by the Rous family, was described in 1785 by James Cresson and John Parish, Quaker visitors to Barbados, as follows:

"Close to St. Philip's Church is a large burying-place formerly kept in good order, but now in a very ruinous condition. Here are a number of vaults dug out of the solid stone belonging to the Weeks and other families that formerly were Friends which are very curious and worth going to see."⁴

There was a further description in 1927 by a Barbadian, Eustace M. Shilstone:

“On reaching the top of the hill which leads to St. Philip’s Church, if you turn away to your left and follow the foot-path through the little village, you will soon find yourself standing near the edge of a cliff in the old Quaker burial ground. On one side you will see a stonewall enclosure with an iron gate, through which you may pass by half a dozen steps to the floor of the enclosure several feet below the level of the surrounding ground.

In this graveyard are nine tombs hewn out of the rock, the apertures being closed by stone slabs. One of these slabs bears the letters R.W., another the letter G. These are respectively the family burial places of Ralph Weekes and John Gittens. The other tombs are not marked in any way, but one is usually pointed out as that of the Pilgrim family. Without this graveyard a few broken tombstones lie half buried, and where the cliff has been washed away in places by heavy rains the remains of a few leaden coffins can be seen.”⁵

The burial ground was originally proposed in the Will of Richard Settle in 1670. He left a legacy of sugar towards buying “a piece of land for a burying ground for friends upon the Cliff”.⁶ His step-son, Robert Taylor, mentioned the burial ground as follows: “I also desire that the vault which we have begun in friend’s burial place on the Cliff may be finished quickly wherein I desire my father and mother and my former wife’s bones with mine own may be decently put as soon as may be and that it will be a burial place for my family as we formerly intended it.”⁷

The tradition among current members of both the Weekes and the Gittens families in Barbados is that they are directly descended from the early Quakers, but unfortunately in each case there is a gap in the records, now held at the Barbados National Archives, and they cannot be sure.

The seventeenth century Ralph Weekes, who was described as a surgeon, owned Mangrove Plantation in St. Philip, and was a leading member of Thicketts Meeting. His name appears several times in the records as paying large fines. His son, Ralph Jr., married a non-Quaker and was baptised as an Anglican but continued an association with the Meeting.

John Gittens, who also suffered many fines, had a large family, and he and at least two of his sons owned plantations in St. Philip. In the eighteenth century some members of the family moved to Philadelphia, and the American descendents are well-documented.

The Pilgrims, on the other hand, are able to trace their ancestry back to the seventeenth century brothers Thomas and John. There are now Pilgrims living in Barbados, in England, and in the United States.

Thomas Pilgrim, who came from England and who returned there before his death, was a leading member of the Quakers in Barbados. He was a signatory to several "Addresses to the Governor" which set out the sufferings experienced by the Quakers, and he had to pay large fines on a number of occasions. Besse's *Sufferings* lists one of these fines in detail, with an interesting comment at the end.

"Thomas Pilgrim, for not appearing and not sending Men in Arms, 80 l. 5s. 9d. for opening shop on the Day called Christmas-day 20 l. 5s. and for Church-claims and Priests Wages, 29 l. 13s. 1d. In all 130 l. 3s. 10d.

Among these Distresses the Spoilers seized the principal Negro Woman he had in his family, carrying her away from her Husband, Children and Grand-Children; though her Master would not have separated her so from them for any Money whatsoever."⁸

The Pilgrims in Barbados are descended from Thomas's brother John. According to them, John decided to take the oath, and become a government official so he did not officially join the Quakers, but participated in both Quaker and Anglican services.

The will of Robert Pilgrim, dated 1761, states "It is my desire and I shall be thankfull to my executrix hereinafter mentioned to deposit my body with decent burial in the Family Vault in Quakers Yard near Saint Phillips Church with my brothers and sisters."⁹ His wife Elizabeth was his executrix, and one of the witnesses to the will was Ralph Weekes, probably grandson of the first Ralph Weekes. The burial ground was therefore definitely still in use in 1761.

The burial ground is still identifiable today, although there are houses beside it and it has been filled by soil, rubbish, and stones from the boundary wall which have fallen in. Initial clearing work has revealed four of the vaults including the one with the initials of Ralph Weekes who died in 1700.

The present owner of the property is very receptive to having the site restored and to having visitors come to see it.

A committee has been formed to raise money for clearing out the site, restoring the vaults, and rebuilding the entrance gate and surrounding wall.

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NOTES

- ¹ Richard Hall, *Acts Passed in the Island of Barbados, from 1643 to 1762*. (London, Printed for Richard Hall, 1764),97.
- ² *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. George Nickalls, "To the Governor and Assembly at Barbados, 1671" (London, Cambridge University Press, 1952), pp. 602-606.
- ³ Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers*. Facsimile of part of the 1753 edition (York, Sessions Book Trust, 2001), Vol. 3., pp. 278-351.
- ⁴ Quaker File, Barbados Museum Library, typescript of an article from *The Friends Quarterly Examiner* No. CIV (October) 1892.
- ⁵ Eustace M. Shilstone, "Some Early Records of the Friends in Barbados", *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* Vol. XXXIV, No. 1 (May 1971), p. 43.
- ⁶ James C. Brandow, *Genealogies of Barbados Families* (Baltimore, MD, Genealogical Publishing Services, 1983), 501.
- ⁷ Brandow, *Genealogies of Barbados Families*, 503.
- ⁸ Besse, *Sufferings*, 338.
- ⁹ Barbados National Archives, Last Will and Testament of Robert Pilgrim dated 5 July 1761, RB6/17 p. 157.