

## Anecdotes of Benjamin Lay

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THE following, by John Hunt, of New Jersey (c. 1740-1824), appeared in *Friends' Miscellany*, vol. iv, Phila. 1833 :

“ 12th of 3d mo. 1785, in conversation with our friend, John Forman, of North Wales, mention was made of Benjamin Lay. I said, I thought he was the first Friend that bore a testimony against slave-keeping. He said, ‘ No ; there was one John Farmer, a Friend, on a visit from England, that had a very powerful testimony against the oppression of the black people ’. He informed me that at a meeting in Pennsylvania, this John Farmer bore his testimony against slave-keeping, and a great man, who kept negroes, being there, got up and desired Friends to look on that man as an open enemy to the country ; and some Friends, also rather bearing against him, persuaded him to make something like an acknowledgment. This so struck John Farmer that he sunk under it, declined in his gift, and never went back to England, but died here. On his death-bed he said he was entirely easy about every thing but that of flinching from his testimony at that time and in that manner.

“ John Forman gave me further information concerning Benjamin Lay’s testimony in several respects, one of which was against smoking tobacco. He said he saw Benjamin come into the Yearly Meeting and seat himself between the galleries of the men and women with three long pipes stuck in his bosom. There he sat till meeting was ready to break up ; then he rose, dashed one pipe down amongst the ministers on the men’s side, another amongst the women, and the third amongst the common people—as much as to say they were all of a piece.

“ At another time Benjamin came into the Yearly Meeting with a bladder filled with blood in one hand and a sword in the other. He ran the sword through the bladder and sprinkled the blood on divers Friends, and declared that

so the sword would be sheathed in the bowels of the nation if they did not leave off oppressing the negroes.

“ He had a testimony against drinking tea, and once stood behind the tea-table and preached all the time the company were drinking tea. Another time he took some tea cups and broke them to pieces in the most public place in the market. By such singular methods did Benjamin Lay consider himself called upon to arrest the attention of people on subjects that he had a testimony against.

“ John Forman said Benjamin used to go barefoot, wore tow trousers and a tow coat very much darned ; that he sometimes lived on acorns, chestnuts and cold boiled potatoes, and wore his beard. He once noticed him going from the Yearly Meeting and thought his countenance bespoke innocency and righteousness.

“ 1787. In conversation with Abraham Matlack, Benjamin Lay’s act in breaking the teacups was mentioned. He told me that his father, being at market, saw the transaction, and that Benjamin, being a very little, light man, the boys of the town gathered round and not willing to see the tea cups broken, one of them went behind him, stuck his head between his legs, took him upon his shoulders and carried him off, whilst the others bore off the remainder of the tea tackling.”

BENJAMIN LAY (1681-1759) was born at Colchester in the county of Essex, of Quaker parents, who were of insufficient means to provide their son with a good education, so that he possessed no more than the rudiments of learning. He was apprenticed to a glove maker but at the age of nineteen he went on to a farm and later gratified his ambition to be a sailor. In 1710 he married and settled in his native town. His wife, Sarah Lay, became a Minister ; she predeceased her husband. There was no family. In 1717 he was disunited from Friends. In 1718 he removed to the island of Barbados, and established himself in a mercantile business and began work on behalf of the slave with which his name is particularly associated. A wave of opposition to his advocacy of freedom for the slave carried him away from the island and landed him in Philadelphia, in 1731.

Lay’s personal appearance is thus described by Roberts Vaux, from whose *Life of Lay*, published in Philadelphia in

1815, many of these facts are taken : " He was only four feet seven inches in height ; his head was large in proportion to his body ; the features of his face were remarkable and boldly delineated and his countenance was grave and benignant. He was hunchbacked, with a projecting chest, below which his body became much contracted. His legs were so slender as to appear almost unequal to the purpose of supporting him. He had a large white beard." Curiously, his wife very much resembled him in size, having also a crooked back. [See illustration].

" His independence of opinion and freedom of expression, rendered him an unwelcome emigrant ; his sentiments met with vigorous opposition from every quarter. In 1732 he took up his residence at a house he had built in the form of a cave known as Hope Cave and there with his wife he lived a very frugal existence." His biographer gives a somewhat different account of his action at the Y.M. at Burlington, N.J. " He prepared a sufficient quantity of poke-berry (*Phytolacca decandra*) to fill a bladder he contrived to conceal within the cover of a large folio volume, the leaves of which he had removed." Appearing in military guise he attended the meeting, addressed the company, and with his sword pierced the bladder and sprinkled the contents over the people.

He entertained notable persons to dinner in his cave.

Later, he and his wife went to reside with John Phipps, near Abington meetinghouse and not long before his death he had the great joy to know that the Friends had decided to disown such of their members as would not desist from holding slaves.

His published writings included : *All Slavekeepers that keep the Innocent in Bondage*, which was printed in 1737 by Benjamin Franklin, a friend of Lay. But it did not meet with the approval of the Society of Friends. In 1738, Philadelphia Y.M. made the following minute : " John Kinsey was ordered to draw an advertisement to be printed in the newspapers of Philadelphia in order to inform all whom it may concern that the book lately published by Benjamin Lay was not published by approbation of Friends ; that he is not in unity with us, and that his book contains false charges as well against particular persons of our Society as against Friends in general " (quoted in *Bulletin F.H.S.* viii. 5, see iii. 158, x. 58.

The home of JOHN FARMER was at Stansted in the county of Essex. With certificates from his home-Meetings he went to America and seems to have visited largely in that country. At the Yearly Meeting in Philadelphia in 1713 he produced certificates from various parts recording his excellent service. In 1715 he again crossed the Atlantic and was in Maryland with Richard Townsend, a Minister who had visited Friends in England and who died in 1737 (Comly, *Misc.* viii. 281, 286). In 1716 he was involved in controversy in New England, being in strong sympathy with the negro population. "He no doubt lost his patience on finding that his testimony in this respect had not a ready entrance among Friends." In addition to biting remarks he used his pen to maintain his views and "published several papers on the subject of slavery, about 1717, most, if not all of which were disapproved of, by Friends" (Smith, *Cata.* i. 584). The Y.M. of Ministers and Elders at Newport, R.I., disowned him until he should recall his papers, and when he arrived in Philadelphia, his conduct in reading his pamphlets in meeting as well as out was equally objectionable, and the action of the northern Meeting was endorsed. Against this he appealed and threatened to carry his appeal to England. The action of Philadelphia Q.M. is mentioned in Rancocas *John Woolman*, pp. 28, 29. To this Meeting he addressed a paper "against Slave-holding, the Casting of Lotts, &c." He was dealt with "for disorderly practices in sending and Publishing papers tending to Division."

There is an account of Farmer in *The Friend* (Phila.), vol. 28 (1855), p. 316.

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"To what, in every month amount  
Its sum of days, we thus may count:—  
The fourth, eleventh, ninth and sixth,  
To thirty days in each are fixt;  
The second twenty-eight alone,  
And all the rest have thirty-one;  
But when 'tis leap year, we assign  
Unto the second twenty-nine."

*Printed on back of title page of "An Almanack for the Use of Friends,"*  
1794.