

Baltimore Yearly Meeting, 1672-1938

The Story of Baltimore Yearly Meeting from 1672 to 1938. Compiled by Anna Braithwaite Thomas. Baltimore, Md. Weant Press, 1938. pp. 142+xiii, map. Can be obtained from the Friends' Book Centre, Friends House, Euston Road, London, N.W.1. 6s.

AMONG the Quaker "Publishers of Truth" who carried their message across the Atlantic in the early days of the Society, was a woman Friend named Elizabeth Harris, who in 1656 visited Virginia where "her labours were blessed to many who were sincere seekers after heavenly riches". She was followed by others who were so successful both in Virginia and Maryland that there were soon many groups of Friends in both these provinces and also in the Carolinas.

Anna B. Thomas quotes S. B. Weeks as saying in his book, *Southern Quakers and Slavery* that "The Quakers . . . became towards the close of the seventeenth century the largest and the only organized body of Dissenters in these Colonies".

In 1672 John Burnyeat, an English Minister, who had had much useful service amongst Friends, called a Meeting at West River in Maryland which lasted four days and was attended by Friends and many others from all parts of the Province. George Fox was present and encouraged Friends to set up Meetings for Discipline and this "Great Meeting" at West River is reckoned as the first session of Baltimore Yearly Meeting.¹ This gives Baltimore a place as the second oldest Yearly Meeting in the United States (New England was established in 1661) and its story naturally includes many things which affected the whole life of American Quakerism.

We find also that Baltimore, although the smallest in numbers, has held an important place amongst the American Yearly Meetings because amidst the changes which have been adopted in many places with regard to the Ministry and the outward form of worship, it has kept more closely than most to the original type of Quakerism preached by George Fox and the early Friends. Also it was from Baltimore that the first great Quaker emigration to the West took place. It began in 1770 and by 1820 it was computed that no fewer than 20,000 Friends were then settled with their families west of the Alleghanies, where Ohio, and other new Yearly Meetings, were being established.

In the early colonial days negro slavery was accepted as a matter of course. Friends with others grew rich on the proceeds of slave labour, and the spiritual life of the Society declined. When John Woolman visited Virginia in 1746 he lamented that slavery "appeared as a dark gloominess hanging over the land". The awakening to

¹ Until 1790 called the "Maryland General Meeting".

the evil of the system and the difficulties and sacrifices which Friends had to meet, when they freed their slaves, are vividly described. We cannot be surprised that the process was a slow one, but by 1800 Friends throughout the American Colonies could report themselves "clear of holding slaves".

The War of Independence was also a severe testing time for Friends, but these troubles proved spiritually bracing, and at the close of the War the Society was in a more vigorous state than it had been for years.

Other interesting chapters in this book include extracts from an old Record Book of Women's Meetings in Maryland from 1677 to 1790, and from the journal of Rachel Wilson, an English Friend, who in 1768-9 travelled (mostly on horseback) nearly 2,000 miles visiting Friends in their Meetings on the Atlantic seaboard. Anna Thomas also gives us an account of the Hicksite and Wilburite separations and of the Civil War resulting in the enforced liberation of all slaves throughout the United States. After that we read of the splendid work carried on by Baltimore and other Friends in repairing the ravages of war and especially in starting schools both for their own members and for the freed slaves.

We are told of visits from many English Friends including Anna Braithwaite, Joseph John Gurney, Daniel Wheeler, John Pease, J. J. Neave, Joseph Crosfield, Joseph B. Braithwaite and many others.

Virginia, which was at first a separate Yearly Meeting, became in 1845 a part of Baltimore Y.M. After the Civil War this joint Yearly Meeting grew steadily both in numbers and in spiritual power. The numbers increased from about 500 in 1865 to over 1,000 in 1900. Short accounts are included of many of its leading members, Francis T. King, James C. Thomas and many others. F. T. King and J. C. Thomas took a leading part in the founding of the Johns Hopkins University and Hospital. At one time Dr. Rendel Harris and four or five other Professors or Lecturers were members of the Meeting. And so we come to the establishment of the Five Years Meeting, the building of the new Homewood Meeting House in Baltimore and the co-operation of the two Meetings, Park Avenue and Homewood in celebrating the 250th anniversary of Baltimore Y.M., an occasion to which Friends of all branches from all the American Yearly Meetings were invited, and which proved a time of happy fellowship.

In her concluding chapter Anna B. Thomas writes "In bringing these records to a close at a time when the world is full of confusion and fear . . . I do not feel discouraged about the future of Baltimore Yearly Meeting. There is still a living experience of the power and presence of Christ among us that means growth and victory."

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