

Early Marriage Certificates

WILLIAM W. COMFORT, writing in the *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, 40, 1951, on "Quaker Marriage Certificates,"¹ says that the earliest marriage certificate of which he has seen a copy is that of George Fox and Margaret Fell (p. 71). It is to be dated in October, 1669. Certificates have been published in *Journal F.H.S.* for 1670 (xxxi. 82), 1673 (xxxiii. 68) and 1679 (xxxii. 47f.). John William Graham (in *Friends Intelligencer*, 8mo. 20, 1927, p. 679) said the earliest marriage certificate known among Friends is in the Bodleian Library in Oxford and concerns a marriage of two of his ancestors at Allonby in 1677. For another certificate of 1673 see *Quakeriana* I, 1894, p. 124.

A certificate of earlier date from Bedfordshire is printed by W. M. Wigfield, M.A., in the documents illustrating his article on "Recusancy and Nonconformity in Bedfordshire" in the *Publications* of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 20, 1938, pp. 173f. from the documents in the Public Record Office at Bedford. It reads as follows :

These are to certifie all whome it doth or may concerne that James Albright of Aspely-guise in the county of Bedd: and Elizabeth Yorke of Hanslope in the county of Bucks, did both by full expressions of words, and by takeing each other by y^e hand declare them selves to be man and wife, and to live to gether in gods holy feare as becomethe that relation so long as they both shall liue. all which was performed in the presence of us whose names are here unto subscribed, and in y^e dwelling house of y^e said James Albright in Aspely-guise aforesaid the eight day of y^e month (called Septem[ber]) in the yeare one thousand six hundred sixtie seauen.

Tho: Ballard
William Albright
Richard Marks
Richard Hartwell
John Yorke

Henry Biggs
Joseph Yorke
hugh albrigt

Since the Quaker procedure resembled the civil procedure under the Directory one might not be sure whether such a

¹ Offprint, presented by the author, in the Library, Friends House.

certificate is rightly called Quaker when the text has no reference to Quaker auspices or when as in the 1673 certificates it refers only to "the assembly for the people of God" at Brigflats in the aforesaid Sedbergh or "the Lord's people" at Holderness. In the certificate here quoted the witnesses can mostly be identified as Friends through the occurrence of their names in the Bedfordshire chapter of Besse's *Sufferings*.

Two earlier certificates for 1661 and 1663 of widows of Nailsea are printed from the originals now at Friends House Library in *Journal F.H.S.* xxi, 1924, 44. Again, Besse, who has a long list of Somerset prisoners for precisely the year 1661, confirms the Quakerism of fully half the witnesses, though the text of the certificates contains at most for religious identification the phrase "according to Church order." Consulting the county registers of Friends' marriages, I find these and the Bedfordshire marriage entered, and with exact agreement of detail.

Perhaps still earlier certificates will come to light.¹ If not, that may well be an accident rather than evidence that they were not used. Instructions to Friends to have a record in writing to which some or all the witnesses subscribe their names date back to 1659 and perhaps earlier (A. R. Barclay, *Letters &c., of Early Friends*, 1841, pp. 283, 279). The earliest certificates extant show no stereotyped form.

That Friends did not conform to the procedure of the Church of England may be taken for granted. After the Restoration they were punished for not doing so. See, for example, *Record of Sufferings of Quakers in Cornwall*, 1928, pp. 52, 54, 56, cases in 1663 for which Besse i. 118 assumes that the witnesses to the Quaker ceremony "had signed a testimonial thereof." But even earlier according to Besse, i. 4 (Bedfordshire, 1658), 194 (Essex, 1659), ii. 96 (Yorkshire, 1654-1657), Friends were punished "for having taken each other in marriage, otherwise than in the form appointed by

¹ The digested marriage registers at Friends House begin, in the case of many Quarterly Meetings, with marriages in the Commonwealth period. No less than sixteen begin with marriages in 1655 or earlier, viz. (1646) Plymouth; (1650) Bradford, Brighouse, Lancaster, Pardshaw (Cumberland); (1651) York; (1652) Cartmel, Swarthmore (Lancs.); (1654) Knaresborough, Mosedale (Cumberland), Swaledale (Yorks.), Thirsk, Westmorland; (1655) Balby, Isel (Cumberland), Morley (Cheshire). An examination of the original entries for these digests might show that they were full copies of the certificates made.

the Directory.” The Quaker registers enable us to expand the data of some of these marriages with wife’s name and date, as follows :

John Impey and Anne Squire married at Beckerings Park, 13.iv.1658.

Simon Rither of York and Ann Key, 27.ix.1656.

Mathew Weightman of York, tailor, and Susanna Horsley, 26.x.1656.

In what respect they did not conform is a question that our historians do not seem to have considered or answered. The historians mostly connect the marriage procedure of Friends precisely with the Directory. So R. Barclay, *Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*, 1876, p. 406. The latest and fullest discussion of Quaker marriage is in Arnold Lloyd’s *Quaker Social History*, 1950, Chapter 4. He mentions (p. 63, note 30) the Kay-Worsley certificate (1666) and says of the Commonwealth period, “ The Martin-Huntley certificate (3.x.1658) is the only known survivor of this period ; there is a transcript in the Somerset House folio collection ” (*ibid.* note 22). This marriage is recorded in the Friends registers for London and Middlesex.

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