

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
March 14, 2010

## Friends Who Came Before Us

by Donne Hayden

### ***On the Occasion of the 195<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cincinnati Friends Meeting***

Though Friends began meeting for worship in Cincinnati homes as early as 1811, not until March 15, 1815, did Cincinnati Friends Meeting become a full-fledged monthly meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. In recognition of this and of the past 195 years of community, it seems fitting to remember how it began.

We have no thorough and complete history of this meeting, only the brief summary (*150 Years of Cincinnati Friends Meeting*) from Rev. Thomas J. Kiphart who apparently took on the task of writing the meeting's history for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. His book is short and covers little of the meeting's history in detail. Once you start digging through Quaker minutes and records, the volume of information is overwhelming, so it's possible Rev. Kiphart simply ran out of time. I say this because our two-hundredth anniversary is coming up soon, and if anyone is so inclined, five years might be long enough to research and write a thorough history of this meeting.<sup>1</sup>

Some of you may have read Rev. Kiphart's book, or know the history of the Meeting from other sources; what follows are some historical tidbits I find interesting, such as how a 1904 *Cincinnati Enquirer* article describes the beginning of Cincinnati Friends Meeting:

*In 1808 the first Miami Monthly Meetings of Friends were held at Waynesville, Ohio. By 1811 meetings were being held at private residences in Cincinnati, such as those of Oliver M. Spencer, Martha Perry, Cyrus Coffin, John F. Stall, and Elizabeth Folger. In 1812 came Elizabeth*

*Robson, of England, on a mission from English Quakers, to bring comfort, advice, and encouragement to the brethren and sisters in the wilds of the Ohio country.* (newspaper clipping on CFM website)

When the “celebrated English Quaker Elizabeth Robson” came to Cincinnati, Friends held a large public meeting “in the Court House on Main street south of Fifth street” (sic) because they were still meeting in private homes and had no meetinghouse yet. In 1812 (when the fledgling United States was again at war with England), Elizabeth Robson was not yet as famous among Friends as she would become. In her later years, she visited monarchs across Europe, spreading the Quaker message to royalty in France, Germany, Holland, etc.

Among those mentioned as providing a place for Friends to worship before they had a meetinghouse was Oliver M. Spencer, a Methodist minister.<sup>2</sup> Though we have probably never heard of him, in 1904, those reading the *Enquirer* would have known Oliver Spencer as a minor local celebrity. In 1792 when he was ten years old, Spencer was captured by Mohawk “Indians” on the banks of the Ohio River. He spent the next three years living with them, eventually making his way back home in 1795. His notoriety is apparent in this comment from the Federal Writers’ Project, *They Built A City*: “In March 1807 a banking office was opened at the foot of Sycamore Street, with Rev. Oliver M. Spencer, a pioneer of the old school, once captured by Indians, as first cashier.”<sup>3</sup>

Back to Cincinnati Quakers. In 1813, “a minister with credentials” arrived from Virginia. At the time remember, **all** Quaker meetings were unprogrammed—none of them hired ministers. So being a “minister with credentials” simply meant that Christopher Anthony’s gift for vocal ministry had been recognized and recorded by Friends in Virginia. With his wife, Mary,

Christopher Anthony seems to have been the guiding force behind organizing the group of Friends in Cincinnati into a “preparative meeting,” i.e., still “under the care of” nearby Miami Monthly Meeting in Waynesville, Ohio.

In 1813, the same year the Anthonys arrived, Friends acquired property at what was then Market Street between Fifth and John Streets. Today, the spot is under some of the viaducts where I-75 and I-71 join in downtown Cincinnati, just north of the Brent Spence Bridge. On the property in 1813, however, was a “nice hewn log house,” one of two built in 1800 by Peyton Short, a land speculator and politician from Kentucky, (brother-in-law of future president, William Henry Harrison). The *Centennial History of Cincinnati* says that when Friends purchased the building, they added “A frame structure . . . on the east and with a few changes the building served its purpose until 1859” at that location on Market Street. By 1859, however, there were two different Quaker meetinghouses on Market Street. In the 1830s the Religious Society of Friends in America had split over theological differences. One group (the “Hicksites”) followed the teachings of the original Friends about the authority of Scripture, i.e., that the Spirit itself was the highest authority. The other group, (the “Orthodox”) returned to more traditional Christian understanding of the Scriptures as the highest spiritual authority to which human beings had access. This difference led to a severe and painful separation among Friends in Cincinnati and elsewhere. In 1840, the Orthodox Friends of Cincinnati Friends Meeting moved out of the original Market Street meetinghouse and built their own meetinghouse a few hundred yards away. By 1859, the original structure was occupied by the Hicksite Friends.

Here is a first-hand account in the words of Clarissa Gest, a member of Cincinnati Friends who was a child at the time of the Orthodox/Hicksite split in 1828.

*My early recollection of the meeting which cannot be previous to 1826 or 8, there was quite a full house, and the back seat near the entrance was rather elevated and was occupied by the children and their attendants, as some of the latter were colored, they created quite an interest in some of us children who were not accustomed to the latter race.<sup>4</sup>*

...

*At the time of the separation in 1828, those left in possession [of the meetinghouse] were termed Hicksites, while those who left were termed Orthodox, who claiming all the children formed the majority [i.e. because they were parents of all the children in the meeting, the Orthodox were more numerous]. . . .*

*The Orthodox erected a Meeting House for themselves in and near the middle of the grounds fronting 5<sup>th</sup> Street, where they remained until a satisfactory division could be made of the property. After some time the grounds were divided between the two parties.*

The Orthodox Friends were the ones who, in 1868, moved to the large brick building at Eighth & Mound Streets, and from there to the Eden Avenue location in 1930. I don't know what happened to the unprogrammed Hicksite Friends of Cincinnati; the current unprogrammed Friends descend from the Orthodox branch via a split that occurred in the 1960s resulting in formation of Community Friends, an unprogrammed meeting, and Cincinnati Friends Meeting, a semi-programmed meeting (meaning we have minimal program during Meeting for Worship, the main focus being open, silent, waiting worship). Though evolved from the Orthodox branch of Friends, many contemporary Cincinnati Friends are more comfortable (theologically-speaking) with "Hicksite" interpretations of spiritual authority.

In the interest of time this morning, I must now skip over decades of history, rich in social action and spiritual leadership, until we come to Cincinnati Friends Meeting today. Who are we? Who have we become? Such questions are routinely asked of each monthly meeting and have been since the early days of Friends when Yearly Meetings requested that each monthly meeting submit a "State of Society Report."<sup>5</sup>The State of Society Report we're sending to Wilmington Yearly Meeting this year indicates our meeting is healthy; we have accomplished quite a bit this past year. After I culled as much as I could fit into the one-page, single-spaced requirement (it was actually about 1 ½ pages), Mary Ellen Krisher, the Clerk of the Meeting read what I had written and wrote a brilliantly succinct summary. I hope she doesn't mind if I quote her: "I read it to search for the answer to who we are," she wrote to me in an email.

*We raised money for Afghanistan orphans, mostly by individual donations, did major repair work on the building, provided food for fellowship each Sunday, established guidelines for encouraging ministry and changed our seating arrangement. Some of our committees are faltering. If we added the depth of our worship and spiritual nurture groups we could claim to be doing pretty well.*

The State of Society Report as I have written it, however, makes no mention of tensions experienced this past year (some of you may be blissfully unaware there were any tensions!). So long as human beings interact at deep levels, there will inevitably be conflict. The only way to avoid conflict entirely is to avoid community, something antithetical to the Quaker way. And just because we're Quakers doesn't mean we are more conflict-free than others; it just means we're more determined to do all we can to preserve love and unity among us. It means that we value unity above division; it means that we value what we can accomplish as a community

above what any individual alone can achieve. It means that we spent time—years sometimes—trying to avoid separation from each other, trying to preserve unity which we recognize as a central quality of the Truth, the Light, the Spirit, the Inner Christ, the Inward Teacher.

I discovered a wonderful description of community and how it functions in a novel by Wendell Berry titled *Jayber Crow*. The title character narrates from his point-of-view as seminary-drop-out, barber, part-time church janitor and gravedigger in Port William, a fictional community in Kentucky. Here is Jayber Crow on the matter of community and membership in it.

*My vision of the gathered church that had come to me after I became the janitor had been replaced by a vision of the gathered community. What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. . . . It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill. I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William and of no other place on earth. My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by its members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.*

I am led to think of the Cincinnati Friends Meeting community, of how it is now, of how it came into being, of how our lives are joined to those few Friends in 1811 who gathered in

homes in a frontier village just outside Fort Washington on the banks of the Ohio River. Of how what brings us together in 2010 is much the same as what brought them together: we gather for the comfort and challenge of spiritual community; we are drawn by the Friends message; to what Rufus Jones described as “religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence.”

I will leave you today with more from Jayber Crow. These thoughts resonate deeply with me when I consider the essence of Cincinnati Friends Meeting and the current “state of our society.”

*What I had come to know (by feeling only) was that the place’s true being, its presence you might say, was a sort of current, like an underground flow of water, except that the flowing was in all directions and yet did not flow away. When it rose in your heart and throat, you felt joy and sorrow at the same time, and the joining of times and lives. To come into the presence of the place was to know life and death, and to be near in all your thoughts to laughter and to tears. This would come over you and then pass away, as fragile as a moment of light.*

Through nearly two centuries, though this community and its message may have “flowed in all directions,” yet it has not “flowed away.”

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, we have many historic documents scanned and posted on our website under “About the Meeting.” Click on “The Meetinghouse” and “Historical Archives.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Oliver M. Spencer. *A true narrative of the capture of the rev. O.M. Spencer, by the Indians*. Washington, Pennsylvania, 1835. Howes S835. First edition of a much-reprinted Indian captivity narrative. Spencer was ten when he was captured in 1792. He was ransomed the following year and returned home in 1795. *Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library* website, Yale University. [http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/brblinfo/brblguide\\_2000.html](http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/brblinfo/brblguide_2000.html)

<sup>3</sup> *They Built A City*, Federal Writers Project Ohio, Internet Archives, <http://www.archive.org/details/theybuiltcity15000federich>

<sup>4</sup> According to Clara Gest, "*Friends in years gone by did not encourage Sunday or First Day schools, holding the idea that it was the duty of parents to teach their children the Bible, and the great principles of truth and Christianity. In later years, they adopted Sunday Schools, and about 1840 or later, some of the teachers were Elizabeth Morgan, Charlotte Davis, Elland Osborn . . .*"

<sup>5</sup> *When Yearly Meeting in 1682 decided to ask the representatives from each quarterly meeting to reply to three questions orally, Yearly Meeting itself had only been meeting consecutively for the previous few years and the systematic organisation of quarterly and monthly meetings had been recently completed. These questions were intended to produce factual information from Friends with local knowledge, so that the progress of the Society throughout the country could be seen and help given in the areas where it was most needed.*

***What Friends in the ministry, in their respective counties, departed this life since the last yearly meeting?***

***What Friends imprisoned for their testimony have died in prison since the last yearly meeting?***

***How the Truth has prospered amongst them since the last yearly meeting, and how Friends are in peace and unity?***

*These three questions were expanded into six in 1694 and further amended in the early 1700s but their purpose was still mainly to elicit factual information. The practice of requiring oral replies to the questions soon became too cumbersome and was replaced, following Yearly Meeting decisions in 1700 and 1706, by written replies from the quarterly meetings. The system of replying to the questions took root in the Society and the term 'query' was increasingly used, in Yearly Meeting minutes from 1723 onwards, instead of 'question'.*

*As the practice of replying to the queries became more formal their purpose also began to change. In the early eighteenth century Friends generally ceased to believe that the whole nation would accept the truth that they had been preaching and became more concerned in preserving the Society as 'a precious remnant' devoted to the truth. The queries were increasingly used to ensure consistency of conduct among Friends and to obtain information as to the state of the Society. (Chapter 1, *Faith & Practice*, Britain Yearly Meeting).*