

Religious Society of Free Quakers
Annual Meeting, November 17, 2005
Historian's Report

I am pleased to report that your historian has been able to give Samuel Wetherill (1736-1816 - aka Bill Robling) assistance in recalling his myriad activities as master carpenter, textile manufacturer and advocate of a kind of trade group known, in 1775, as "The Establishment of American Manufactures." From this activity, because Wetherill needed dyestuffs for his textile goods, he branched out into a field broadly considered, in his time, drugs, opening a chemical firm to manufacture dyes with his son, Samuel (1764-1829), in 1785. Four years later, he moved his operation from South Alley, in the second block of the Mall between Market and Arch and Fifth and Sixth Streets, to No. 65 North Front Street – a location that would gain fame as "Wetherill's Drug Store." All information has been documented from primary sources.

While conducting himself as a businessman, Samuel Wetherill held a position among his fellow Quakers as a preacher. As we know, his views, especially after he was disowned in 1779, challenged various Quaker doctrines and called upon his fellows to espouse tolerance claiming, in 1798, "that the church of Christ is made up of the righteous of every denomination" and that because Christ gave his life for the church "no one church or society can appropriate this sacred character to themselves..." [Apology, 1798] This was radical stuff and, after the Peace of Paris in 1783, the same year this meeting house was built, had little appeal among disenfranchised Quakers and apologists from other traditions.

On Halloween 2005, Dennis Reidenbach, then Acting Superintendent, now Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park, issued a report on park interpretative programs conducted by members of the Organization of American Historians. The Free Quaker Meeting House was cited in several contexts as integral to "bringing the history of religion in America back into the story." This has immediate relevance as we struggle with conflicting notions about the separation of church and state and assures the Free Quaker Meeting House a place in the forthcoming long range interpretative plan for INHP.

Shifting gears, I want to call attention to Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), in his 300th anniversary year. Franklin and his wife are buried across the street in the Christ Church Burial Ground. He was in Paris at the time of the first meeting of the Free Quakers in 1781 and also when this Meeting House was built two years later. But, the infant Free Quaker organization owes a debt to Franklin nonetheless because as they outgrew the houses of Samuel Wetherill and Timothy Matlack they were able to gather in the Academy, or New Building, of the College of Philadelphia (Fourth Street between Market and Arch Streets) because of a restriction in the deed, which Franklin insisted upon, that required setting aside a room for the use of "itinerant preachers." [APS Minutes, Box 1, 24th 4th mo 1781)

We are also contemplating simple take-away brochures. The first two will cover the Free Quakers and the Meeting House. We are considering other topics, which may be added to the proposed series.

Respectfully submitted,

Maria M. Thompson
Historian