

Free Quaker Society\*  
Report of the Historian  
Annual Meeting, 15 November 2007

It was agreed in 1882 that the Society would meet at least once a year in November and today marks the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that decision. Going through records for interesting topics to share with you, I decided to speak to the Society's mission of charitable giving.

Eighteenth century Philadelphia, before and after the Revolution, struggled with increasing numbers of poor and insolvent residents. City officials and those in surrounding townships could not agree on either approaches to the problem or methods of funding. Quakers were the first group to acknowledge the need by building an Almshouse in 1713 on Walnut Street west of Third for the relief of poor members of the Society of Friends. Twenty years later the city allocated funds for construction of an Almshouse for the helpless poor and a House of Employment for those who could work but the need was too great to be met by these modest structures and limited programs.

Natives of foreign countries founded social and charitable societies for the benefit of their countrymen. The first of these was the St. Andrew's Society in 1749, which was followed by the Hibernian Club, Sons of St. George, the German Society and many others. Skilled craftsmen and tradesmen also formed guild-like organizations that offered limited financial assistance to members unable to work. Churches and religious groups had funds to aid those in need so it was fitting that the Religious Society of Free Quakers made provisions to look after their own.

This Meeting House was built with cellars and vaults designed for rental and there was a separate entrance on the south side of the building so merchants would have access to their goods without disturbing the meeting. And just four years after the building opened in June 1784 a second floor was constructed in two months and leased to a rent-paying tenant. After meetings for worship ended in the early 1830's, the entire building was leased to the Apprentices' Library for fifty-six years and they were followed by "mercantile companies for ordinary business purposes"<sup>i</sup> until the property was acquired in 1957 (another anniversary!) by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Income also came from bequests, one of which in 1795 designated the beneficiaries as the "poor of the society" and the most sizable being \$3,000 given in 1898 by J. Dundas Lippincott in memory of his grandmother Sarah Lippincott, daughter of Samuel Wetherill.<sup>ii</sup> Minutes of the Society record cash gifts to indigent members and in 1802 a committee was appointed "to enquire [sic] into the situation of those persons belonging to the Society who are poor & thought to be objects of Charity..."<sup>iii</sup> It was left to the discretion of the committee to determine whether gifts of cash or firewood were more appropriate and notes of

assistance and concern for members in “straitened [sic] circumstances” document the continued commitment to this mission. In 1804, the Society decided to assist with the cost of educating the children of poor members and by 1830 left-over funds were distributed to needy non-members in the form of small sums or garments purchased by members of the Society’s Dorcas Committee. This group of ladies carried out the charitable activities of the society including purchases of wood and coal for needy families. Reports from the Dorcas Fund of the Society appear in the minutes from 1869 through 1873. In 1882 when John Price Wetherill was Clerk he summed up the activities of the Society and it is clear that by that time the charity committee included men and women. Grocery orders, shoes and “other

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<sup>i</sup> Charles E. Peterson, FAIA. *Notes on the Free Quaker Meeting House* (Washington: Ross and Perry, 2002), 24.

<sup>ii</sup> APS, Free Quaker Society, Minutes, Box 1, Rough Minutes, 1789-1804, 12<sup>th</sup> mo 10 1795. Membership Records, Correspondence, Box 15, W. Wetherill to Charles Wetherill, 14 November 1898.

<sup>iii</sup> APS. Free Quaker Society, Minutes, Box 1, Rough Minutes, 1789-1804, 5 mo 13 1802.