

Free Quaker Society
Report of the Historian
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It is tempting to think the religious controversies that occupied Samuel Wetherill and those he described as “Friends and Fellow-Sufferers” have little to do with issues we face today. But, as I listened to rhetoric associated with our recent national election, I was reminded that is not the case and allegiance to particular religious groups and views are highly influential in matters beyond what may be described as the spiritual realm.

Wetherill, as you know, agonized over his position within the Society of Friends and the Society, too, was distressed over what they perceived as a dispute over governance. In an undated letter, Wetherill observed, “Although religious controversies have often been productive of mischief, yet, such is the providence of God, that much good also frequently results from them.”¹ He did not elaborate on what good came from his disownment; however, his published writings offer a clue. These writings, by the way, were important enough to him that he placed an advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of January 2, 1793 offering religious tracts for sale. His 1798 *Apology* begins with the assertion that “The Christian religion is a religion of love; love even to enemies...” and, after a lengthy discourse on the evils of excommunication, concludes “that the church of Christ is made up of the righteous of every denomination.”² Those who are disowned are in danger of being lost, he asserted, and this belief may have been the foundation for his initiating public meetings for worship and business in 1781 after all attempts to gain access to established meeting houses and burial grounds failed. Wetherill’s published tracts are replete with assurances that a forgiving God continually reaches out to sinners and, indeed, he points out, Christ laid down his life for all knowing “...there will be as unworthy characters within the pale as without...”³ The few surviving first person accounts, such as the diaries of Jacob Hiltzheimer and Christopher Marshall, support the initial success of the Free Quaker Meeting and acknowledge the leadership of Samuel Wetherill.

Among those said to have been drawn to the Free Quakers because of Wetherill was Dolley Madison, wife of the fourth president. I did a bit of research among the published memoirs and letters of Mrs. Madison in an effort to substantiate the claim made in an 1896 biography: “Dolly [sic] Payne used to declare in later life that the best sermons to which she ever listened were those of Friend Samuel Wetherill, who was equally well known in meeting and market place...”⁴

¹ Carson, Marian S. *The Society of Free Quakers: The Fighting Quakers in the American Revolution*. Typescript. Chapter V, “Later History and Samuel Wetherill,” 5.

² Wetherill, Samuel. *An Apology for the Religious Society, called Free Quakers, in the city of Philadelphia, shewing that all churches who excommunicate, act inconsistently with the Gospel of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Richard Folwell, printer, 1798

³ *Ibid.* 17.

⁴ Goodwin, Maud Wilder. *Dolly Madison*. NY: Charles Scribners Sons, 1898 [c.1896], 26.

Dolley Madison began life in 1768 as Miss Payne, daughter of a birthright Quaker mother and an Anglican father, described as “of middling success,” who had converted in 1764. The family lived in North Carolina and Virginia, freeing their slaves in Virginia 1783, shortly before moving to Philadelphia, a city they had visited in 1779 that was now home to the eldest son, Walter. The 1780’s were difficult economic times and by the end of the decade John Payne’s business failed and he was expelled from Pine Street Meeting for insolvency.⁵ Dolley, twenty at the time, remained a Quaker but it was difficult for her to make peace with the criticism and disownment of her father. In 1790, she married Quaker lawyer and fellow member of Pine Street Meeting, John Todd. But within three years, she suffered the loss of three men she loved: her father in 1792, and her husband and young son on the same October day in 1793, the time of the yellow fever epidemic.

There is no documentation or account in Dolley’s published letters of visits to the Free Quaker Meeting, nor does her name appear on the existing member lists, but the circumstances of her life and the fact that her father was buried in the Free Quaker Burial Ground on Fifth Street near Locust make association with Wetherill and the Free Quakers a reasonable assumption. In addition, Wetherill was one of the ten citizens who assisted the guardians of the poor in coping with the disaster that was the yellow fever epidemic of 1793.⁶ For a man who wrote of a religious society as a “spiritual infirmary”⁷ and preached about the expansive love of Christ and a Christian call to serve those in need, it is unlikely the widow Todd was deprived of the consolation and affection of her fellow Free Quaker Friends.

Without sentimentalizing him, there is, none the less, a lesson for all of us in Samuel Wetherill’s attitude and approaches toward his fellow humans. He was a no nonsense businessman, an innovator in manufacturing, a defender of American industry, and also a devoted believer in “doing good even to enemies” – a forebear both to be proud of and to emulate.

Respectfully submitted,

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⁵ Mattern, David B. and Shulman, Holly C., eds. *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, 10-17.

⁶ Carey, Matthew. *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, lately prevalent in Philadelphia: with a statement of the Proceedings that took place on the subject in different parts of the United States*. Third edition, improved. Philadelphia: 1793, 40.

⁷ Wetherill, *op.cit.*,22

