

Free Quaker Society  
Annual Meeting, November 18, 2010  
Historian's Report

Today, most people rely on sources available over the internet for information and we have a website [www.freequakers.org](http://www.freequakers.org) that gives an overview of the Society and a description of the Meeting House as well as links to other related sites like Independence National Historical Park and Historic Philadelphia. The site also features brief biographies of founder Samuel Wetherill (1736-1816), soldier Timothy Matlack (d.1829), nurse Lydia Darragh (1729-1789) and banner maker Betsy Ross (1752-1836). We intend to expand the biographical entries and it is reasonable to begin at the beginning – with the founding members.

The earliest membership records at the American Philosophical Society are transcripts made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Manuscript records begin in 1785 so it is somewhat challenging to sort out who may claim founder status. There are names on the 1783 deed for the Meeting House lot, Charles Wetherill's 1894 history of the Society has a list of trustees, and lists of early members appear in other 19<sup>th</sup> century books such as Scharf and Westcott's *History of Philadelphia* published in 1884. Working with names appearing on all lists seemed a good place to start.

These disenfranchised Quakers met informally late in 1780 and by 20 February 1781 when they gathered at the house of Samuel Wetherill were formulating a plan to approach Quaker Meetings from which they had been disowned. The seven men present, in addition to Wetherill, were Moses Bartram, Owen Biddle, Isaac Howell, White Matlack, Robert Parrish, Benjamin Say and James Sloan. I will share biographical information about two – Moses Bartram and Owen Biddle. The relationship these men had with the Free Quakers offers insight into the challenges faced by the infant Society – one man stayed connected until the day he died in 1809 and the other returned to his Quaker meeting in 1783 regretting disownment and the circumstances that brought it about.

Moses Bartram (1732-1809) was a son of noted botanist John Bartram but as a young man he was not at all interested in plants and took to the sea. For nearly ten years he sailed the Atlantic and Mediterranean, returning to Philadelphia in 1760 when he joined his brother Isaac in an apothecary shop on Second Street between Arch and Race. In 1762 he signed the Non-Importation Agreement and, at the same time, became involved with Franklin's "Young Junto." Curiosity about scientific matters, especially the cultivation of native silkworms, led to membership in the American Philosophical Society and the publication of papers based on his research. He involved himself in revolutionary matters in spring 1776 and, the following year, enlisted in the Third City Battalion. These activities disturbed members of Bank Meeting who called upon him in May to discuss his warlike behavior. On 23 July 1776 he was disowned, but like Samuel Wetherill and many others considered himself a Friend. He aligned himself with likeminded

Quakers and sought readmission to Meeting. When they were rebuffed, he joined the Free Quakers and faithfully attended meetings for worship and business until the day before his death on 25 December 1809.

There were many intersections in the lives of Moses Bartram and birthright Friend Owen Biddle (1737-1799) beyond their membership in the Free Quakers. Both signed the Non-Importation Agreement, were members of Franklin's Junto and the American Philosophical Society, had an interest in science and silk culture, and supported the revolutionary cause. Biddle was a member of the Provincial Commission and Council of Safety, the Board of War, and, in 1777, was appointed Deputy Commissioner of Forage. His brother, Clement Biddle (1740-1814), also a Free Quaker but not a founder, was Commissary General of Forage for the American Army.

Biddle's differences with the Society of Friends began in 1761 when he married "contrary to discipline" at the Lutheran church. While this action was condemned by the Meeting it does not appear to have had an impact on his membership; perhaps, this is because his wife, Sarah, later joined the Society. But by 1775 things had changed and infractions were not tolerated. Biddle was disowned in October of that year for promoting warlike preparations and instructions in the art of war. His wife and children remained members of the Meeting and were granted "removal certificates" when they moved between Philadelphia and New Garden Meetings and Philadelphia and Sadsbury (Lancaster County) Meetings.

Although Biddle began his business career as a clock and watchmaker, by the time of the revolution his interests were mercantile. His finances suffered during the war; three of his ships were captured and destroyed by the British. He sold assets to satisfy creditors and reevaluated his active participation in the revolution. On 30 May 1783, almost two months before purchase of the lot at the corner of Fifth and Mulberry (Arch) Streets for the new Free Quaker Meeting House, Biddle "made acknowledgement" to Philadelphia Monthly Meeting that he acted "contrary to [the] peaceable principles of Christianity" and longed "to be restored again to membership with you..." Owen Biddle was reinstated and lived the rest of his life as a member of the Society of Friends.

Of course, the Free Quakers thought of themselves as Friends too and that fundamental belief gave meaning to their cause.

Respectfully submitted,

Maria M. Thompson