

Free Quaker Society
Historian's Remarks – Annual Meeting, November 17, 2011

When Samuel Price Wetherill, secretary of the Free Quaker Society, wrote to Roy Larson, chair of the Research and Planning Committee of the Independence Hall Association, in November 1942 it was to express the concern of the Society that the Association supported “a program which might conceivably result in the demolition of this sacred relic [the 1783 Meeting House] which is in their trust...” The Society's concern was not unfounded.

There had been talk about doing “something” to the area around Independence Hall since the beginning of the twentieth century. With the building of the new City Hall and westward movement of much of the financial sector, the neighborhoods nearer the river became home to small manufacturing enterprises, wholesale businesses and warehouses. Even the Free Quaker Meeting House in Old City reflected this trend – in the early years of the century the building housed the Thompson-Adams Leather Company whereas before this it was home to a school and a library.

In the late nineteen-teens the City Beautiful movement made its appearance in Philadelphia with the construction of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, completed in 1918. Its designer, Paul Philippe Cret, the influential head of the Department of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, was asked to submit a plan for the area around Independence Hall. He was one of many consulted on the somewhat amorphous project. A few years later, in 1926, the Sesquicentennial of the nation's founding broadened the audience of those receptive to reverential treatment for Independence Hall and by the 1930's, with the reorganization of the National Park System and the dedication of the nation's first National Historical Park in Morristown, New Jersey, there was widespread support for protecting Independence Hall and showcasing it for visitors. The Historic Sites Act of 1935 gave impetus to a growing interest in the colonial period and restorations and reconstructions like those of Colonial Williamsburg brought the movement to life.

But Independence Hall, Carpenters' Hall, Christ Church, the First and Second Banks and other early buildings, significant architecturally or for their historic associations, were hemmed in by a jumble of buildings, many in deteriorated condition. Edwin Owen Lewis (1879-1974), a transplanted Virginian and judge in the Court of Common Pleas, took up the cause of protecting historic sites in Philadelphia and, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, formed a committee to assess possible plans for the older sections of the city. He formed the Independence Hall Association in 1942, tagging it as “A New Idea for an Old Shrine.” Judge Lewis served as president and the board of directors included prominent citizens, among them Samuel Price Wetherill.

Lewis had a talent for forging alliances with established organizations, like the Fairmount Park Art Association, that gave his infant group increased coverage and influence. Also, he was politically savvy and enjoyed the support of Isidor Ostroff (1906-1976), who represented the Fifth Ward in the Pennsylvania House and led the movement to petition Congress to create a national park in Philadelphia. Together, Ostroff and Lewis brought Lewis' vision to life and, although it has undergone considerable change, the park we know today is the result of their collaborative effort.

In 1943 Independence Hall was declared a National Historic Site and two years later Congress passed a law creating the Philadelphia National Shrines Park Commission with Judge Lewis as chair. The revised plan showed an L-shaped park linking the ramps of the Delaware River Bridge [Benjamin Franklin Bridge] above Race between Fifth and Sixth Streets with Independence Hall on Chestnut Street and the historic

buildings to the east. Fifth and Sixth Streets would be widened for ready access to the heart of the park and all buildings from Race to Chestnut Street would be demolished so those entering the city by automobile would have an unobstructed view of the building in which the nation was born. An article in the *Evening Bulletin* of November 19, 1942 acknowledged the fear expressed by members of the Religious Society of Free Quakers “that its historic meeting house...might be razed, or what is worse, partly cut away, if the proposed park...shall be laid out” and took pains to assure the public that historic buildings with connections to the formative period of the nation would not be “erased.” For the next ten years the lens of park supporters was focused on Independence Hall and its immediate surroundings. The fate of the 1783 Meeting House was up in the air.

The same year Congress authorized formation of the Shrines Park Commission, Judge Lewis appealed to Pennsylvania’s governor for financial support of the park. His proposal would place Independence Hall and the blocks to the east in federal hands, leaving those to the north toward the bridge in the hands of the Commonwealth. Free Quaker Society minutes of October and November 1945 record announcement of a \$4 million appropriation by the Pennsylvania legislature to create a mall that would include the Meeting House as “the only building in the area to be preserved...” While this was good news, nothing happened and annual appropriations went to other projects.

The intense patriotism of the post-war years combined with urban renewal plans like the 1947 “Better Philadelphia Exhibition” to sustain support for safeguarding Independence Hall. In 1948, President Truman signed a bill creating Independence Hall National Historical Park. The following year, Isidor Ostroff organized the Independence Hall Neighborhood Association and in May City Council passed an ordinance authorizing a co-operative agreement between state and city agencies. This worked on paper but in real life created a maze of overlapping agencies with no clearly designated responsibilities. Free Quaker Society minutes record concern that the “present plan” does not include arrangements for transfer of title of the Meeting House to the state or any condemnation award. Board members concluded it was not safe to depend upon the informal assurances of architects and city planning officials and formed a committee to represent the Society’s interests to the state. General Augustine Janeway chaired the committee to safeguard the Meeting House and they acknowledged it was a “complicated matter” because of the ambiguity of plans for what is known as Block Two of the mall.

It took four years from the time demolition began in 1950 on Block One between Chestnut and Market Streets until the park-like space opened to visitors. That would be positively speedy when compared with Block Two where construction was not completed until 1969. If the ten years between 1942 and 1952 were ones of uncertainty for the Meeting House, the negotiations of the next four years assured preservation of the building. At a meeting of the Society on November 15, 1956, Clerk Samuel Price Wetherill welcomed Maurice K. Goddard, Secretary of Forests and Waters, and Joseph M. O’Brien, who represented the state in the real estate transaction, announcing the offer of \$42,000 for the building. The offer assured preservation of the Meeting House and relocation of the building south and west to permit the widening of Fifth Street. In addition, a contract specified restoration, maintenance and preservation of the property. It is not recorded, but I am confident everyone present breathed a sigh of relief. Clerk S.P. Wetherill appointed a special committee chaired by General Janeway to oversee restoration and interpretation of the Meeting House and in closing acknowledged the “devoted efforts of Elkins Wetherill Esq. on behalf of the Society.”

While many worked to assure preservation of the Meeting House, it was Elkins Wetherill who made it happen. All correspondence from Secretary Goddard’s office in Harrisburg is addressed to Mr. Wetherill at his law office in Norristown. He negotiated sale of the building to the state and supported additional

appropriations to complete the mall; \$7 million was appropriated in 1958. Mr. Wetherill oversaw transfer of the Society's records to the American Philosophical Society, thereby assuring preservation of the paper trail in addition to the physical building.

In November 1960, six months before the building was moved, Mr. Wetherill wrote to the board of the Free Quaker Society and his letter included a statement of purpose – “its primary function other than in preserving its own historical records and maintaining a current list of members, is to invest its funds and distribute the income for charitable purposes.” Fifty-one years later his words continue to reflect the mission of the organization and we build on the foundation he made possible.

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