

Free Quaker Society Annual Report of the Historian, November 21, 2013

In 1894, Charles Wetherill published a *History of The Religious Society of Friends Called by Some The Free Quakers, in the City of Philadelphia* that included the text of historic documents in the appendix. One of these was “The Discipline,”ⁱ which was printed as a broadside, an 18th century sort of poster, in 1781, the year Samuel Wetherill and his fellow disowned Quakers established their independent meeting for worship. This was a major step and they had sought the guidance of other Quakers who shared their dilemma in New Jersey, Maryland and the New England colonies. “The Discipline” was a unique document in that after establishing a framework for acting independently – “Disowned and rejected by those among whom we have been educated, and scattered abroad, as if we had been aliens in a strange land...” - it focused on the business of conducting Meeting upon which all members agreed, namely: establishing a meeting for worship and monthly meeting for business, at which minutes would be kept; outlining a procedure for marriage, with details for the equivalent of bans and the exchange of vows; describing the format for record keeping for marriages, births and burials; and the process of admission to the Society. The remaining two requirements of “The Discipline” are, perhaps, the most interesting for us today because they involve the handling of disputes. Earlier Quaker teaching admonished Friends from resorting to courts for the resolution of disagreements. Indeed, Friends were urged to grapple with difficult issues among themselves and to seek the counsel of the Meeting if agreement could not be reached otherwise, so it was radical that the Free Quakers approved consulting secular courts for the resolution of “controversy respecting property.” This disconnect with earlier, approved teaching was acknowledged as “being contrary to that of our ancestors...and even shameful in the Apostle’s day, for brother to go to law with brother...” But it was deemed that the policy was rooted in the belief that secular courts were composed of “unbelievers” while contemporary courts were peopled with “Christians” and it would be best to leave guilt “punished by the laws of the land.” This particular part of “The Discipline” was very important because it directly addressed the prospect of a person to be heard and judged even by those “who may differ in sentiment from any and all of his brethren.” And this was at the core of the Free Quaker dispute – no one ought to be deprived of the right to a different viewpoint, which was the bedrock of religious freedom. Wetherill and his like-minded fellows believed their issue was a political one, not religious, and, therefore, a religious sect had no say in the matter.

Broadsides such as “The Discipline” and other publications of the disowned Friends attracted the attention of Quakers in other communities who corresponded with and visited their brethren for guidance. It is known that Timothy Davis, a New England preacher who was disowned in 1778, visited Philadelphia four years later in 1782. But after peace was declared the following year in 1783 many of the problems among Quakers went away – some Quakers were accepted back at their meetings, others drifted away or chose to worship with other denominations. The Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, however, held fast, drawing a sort of line in the sand and that provided Wetherill, Matlack, Bartram, Say and others with the need to go ahead and establish their own independent meeting.

The contrast between Philadelphia and New England is played out in a 1784 account of a trip made by Samuel Wetherill from Philadelphia to Newport. Wetherill left Philadelphia on September 30th on the Rhode Island Packet and arrived at his destination eight days later after enjoying “the amusements & diversions which the sailors had in striking the Porpoises which at times played around the Vessel, and the pleasure which arises in Contemplating the Wonders of God in the Deep, the Whole together made the Voyage agreeable.”ⁱⁱ

After arriving in Newport, Wetherill travelled to communities along the seacoast in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, visiting Falmouth, Bedford, Fairhaven and Dartmouth, a Quaker stronghold. At one meeting he noted a partition had been erected “and at the same time that the Disowned meet in one end, they who have disowned them meet at the other end...”ⁱⁱⁱ While this was less than ideal, it was all those disowned in Philadelphia requested – admission to the Meeting House for worship and business.

But what was happening in Philadelphia and its surrounding counties was occurring in New England too. Quakers were being accepted back at their former meetings or they were going elsewhere. By this time, Wetherill and his fellow disowned Quakers had charted their course, purchased a lot at Fifth and Arch Streets and erected a brick Meeting House that opened for worship in June 1784.

ⁱ Wetherill (1894), “The Discipline of the Society of Friends, by some styled the Free Quakers” Unanimously agreed to in their Meeting for Business, held in Philadelphia on the Sixth day of the Eighth Month, 1781.

ⁱⁱ Marian S. Carson, “The Society of Free Quakers: The Fighting Quakers in the American Revolution,” typescript, Chapter IV “The Golden Thread,” 3. Carson quotes from “a small paper backed memorandum book” in which Samuel Wetherill recorded an account of his journey. This manuscript book is most likely included in the Cason Collection at the Library of Congress, although the finding aid does not specify its location.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carson, op. cit., 5

Maria M. Thompson