

The Religious Society of Free Quakers  
Annual Meeting, November 19, 2015

**Samuel Wetherill (1736-1816), Preacher**

Samuel Wetherill was about 15 when he left Burlington, New Jersey for Philadelphia to begin an apprenticeship with a Quaker master carpenter Mordecai Yarnall. The apprenticeship ended when he was 21 and two years later he formally joined the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, being received on a certificate from Burlington Monthly Meeting dated 5<sup>th</sup> day 2<sup>nd</sup> month 1759.<sup>i</sup> Wetherill was an active member of the meeting and took his participation seriously. He married a fellow Quaker, Sarah Yarnall, in 1762 and the births of his four children are noted in Philadelphia Monthly Meeting records.

As a carpenter he worked on major civic projects such as the Almshouse and House of Employment (1766) with Benjamin Loxley, Thomas Nevell and Robert Smith<sup>ii</sup> but by the middle of the next decade his business interests included the sale of products like vinegar and the manufacture and sale of textiles.<sup>iii</sup> He supplied the Pennsylvania Board of War with woolen cloth; however it was not this outright support of the war effort that led to his being disowned. Rather, monthly meeting minutes of 1779 note Wetherill's "disunity" was because of "taking a Test of Allegiance & Abjuration...in Opposition to the United Sense and Advice of Friends..." Members of the meeting visited Wetherill on several occasions and attempted "...to Convince him of the hurtfull [sic] Tendency of his Conduct..." but when he held fast to his views they "...declare[d] that he hath Separated himself from Fellowship with Us, and become excluded from membership in our Religious Society..."<sup>iv</sup> The story of how he reached out to others who had been disowned and in 1781 held meetings at his house that led to the founding of the Free Quakers is well known. Today as we are gathered in the brick meeting house with its 1783 date stone where the first meeting for worship was held on June 13, 1784 it seems appropriate to spend a few moments examining Wetherill's religious views to learn why he felt as he did and how his faith bolstered his sense of purpose and mission.

The first line of a short 1859 biographical essay on Samuel Wetherill proclaims that "as a preacher [he] was remarkable" and goes on to reveal he gave sermons until just before his death in 1816.<sup>v</sup> Elsewhere there are records of Wetherill's travels to Maryland and Massachusetts to preach at other meetings of Free Quakers. And in January 1793 he placed a notice in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* advertising his religious tracts for sale. Clearly, Wetherill felt it important to communicate his thoughts on religious matters but these have been subsumed by the larger narrative. Some of his writings appeared as appendices in Charles Wetherill's 1894 *History of the Free Quakers* but, with the exception of "The Discipline of the Society of Friends, by some styled the Free Quakers," most of these are justifications addressed to the General Assembly and while they have theological underpinnings they are by no means religious tracts or statements of belief. So, what did he preach and write about?

Samuel Wetherill knew the bible, was well read in philosophy, especially Locke, and was familiar with authors of works on doctrine and interpretations of Christianity. He was a man of faith who believed in a God who cares for his creatures and, as he explained in "The Discipline," it is essential to our happiness that we behave in a way that is acceptable to the Creator. He placed great stock in mercy and felt those who err (all of us!) ought to be left to the grace of God and the law of the land. The pamphlets printed in the 1790s are remarkably consistent in their views whether Wetherill is refuting an essay by the English scientist and Unitarian Dr. Joseph Priestley on the divinity of Christ, countering "The Doctrines of

Antinomianism” of John Murray, or “...shewing [sic] that all churches who excommunicate, act inconsistently with the Gospel of Jesus.”<sup>vi</sup>

The religious tracts confirm Wetherill’s belief in the incarnation and his understanding that God’s creation is fundamentally good. Human beings are free agents, tainted by original sin, and in need of religious associations to assist in “improvement in piety and virtue.” “A religious society should be a spiritual infirmary,” he wrote, “where measures ought to be taken to heal the diseased.” Time and again he emphasized that Christ died for all and, evoking the symbolism of the vine and branches, claimed the church “includes all those, whoever they are, that by love to Christ are so united to him...” Because of the expansiveness of his views, Wetherill believed “no one church or society can appropriate this sacred character [of Christ] to themselves...” and it is probable that his appeal as a preacher was rooted in what he called a “spirit of love and meekness.” He was tolerant of different viewpoints and respected the sincerity of others. He believed reason alone was insufficient to “discern the truths of religion” and concluded “could human reason of itself understand the things of God, prayer would then be unnecessary.” Wetherill’s writings attest to his conviction that “the human soul, with all its faculties, [has] a capacity to receive light from heaven” and bask in the gift of grace “bestowed upon those who love God above all things.” We have no record of his sermons and just a few short tracts of sixty or so pages but they offer ample testimony of the central role of faith in the life of Samuel Wetherill.

Maria M. Thompson

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<sup>i</sup> Philadelphia Monthly Meeting Records (microfilm), Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

<sup>ii</sup> Charles E. Peterson, Constance M. Greiff and Maria M. Thompson, *Robert Smith: Architect, Builder, Patriot 1722-1777*. (Philadelphia: The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 2000), 98.

<sup>iii</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette* 4 August 1773, 22 March 1775, and 21 August 1776.

<sup>iv</sup> Philadelphia Monthly Meeting Minutes, Quaker Collection, Haverford College (multiple dates) April, May, June, July and August 1779.

<sup>v</sup> Henry Simpson, *The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians, now deceased*. (Philadelphia: William Brotherhead, 1859), 942.

<sup>vi</sup> Samuel Wetherill, *A Confutation of the Doctrines of Antinomianism* (Philadelphia: T. Lang, 1790); *An Apology for the Religious Society, called Free Quakers...* (Philadelphia: Richard Folwell, 1798); *The Grounds and Reason of the Incarnation and Process of Christ explained...* (Philadelphia: Bailey and Crukshank, 1791)