



Col. Timothy Matlack
In his final years.

Christopher Wetherill
Quaker Proprietor

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Quaker Settlement of West New Jersey

By 1680, Quaker rule was established in the Province of West New Jersey. The colonies of Salem and Burlington were not the first white settlements in the area. Both the Swedes and the Dutch preceded the English and traded with the Indians. However, they made little attempt to populate the land which was far from Fort Christina and New Amsterdam. After defeat at sea in 1663/4 Dutch holdings in America were transferred to the English. James, Duke of York, commanded the successful naval expedition and his brother, King Charles II, granted him the land between the Connecticut and Delaware Rivers. James, in turn, granted the southern portion of his territory (New Jersey) to Lord John Berkeley and Sir George Carteret. In March, 1673/4 Berkeley sold his half interest in New Jersey to Major John Fenwick, an old Cromwellian soldier turned Friend.¹ This transaction resulted in the division of New Jersey (West and East) and the beginning of Quaker settlement in the southern (West) portion.

Fenwick quarreled with his fellow Friend Edward Byllynge, a London brewer. The Religious Society became involved because it maintained that Fenwick acted as Byllynge's agent and that Byllynge intended to convey the land to the Friends. It was a bitter and prolonged dispute. William Penn served as an arbiter and awarded nine-tenths of West Jersey to Byllynge and only one-tenth to Fenwick. Penn pressured Fenwick to accept the terms. Byllynge, overwhelmed by financial difficulties, in 1674/5 conveyed his interest in West Jersey to Penn, Gawen Lawrie and

Nicholas Lucas as trustees for his creditors.² Despite stern reprimands from the Friends, Fenwick sold land directly to other Quakers and sailed for America in the summer of 1675. He established the town of Salem, the first Quaker settlement in West Jersey.

A group of Byllynge's creditors from Yorkshire agreed to accept approximately one-tenth of West Jersey as payment for a debt. The Burlington proprietors learned from Fenwick's mistakes and misfortune. Consequently, the principles underlying the later settlement were more liberal and clearly defined. Both settlements attracted men of means who sought to govern themselves, freely practice their religion and reap profits from their investment. In simple terms, Fenwick attempted to interest large purchasers who were responsible for settling their holdings. Burlington's founders realized that populating their district was crucial to its success. They encouraged many smaller investors to pool their resources and purchase a share. Allocations would be made by drawing lots. Financial incentives were offered to those who intended to come to America and settle. In addition, Burlington's visionaries insisted on self-government, an ideal unrealized in Salem.

The first group from York arrived on the ship Kent in 1677. The town of Burlington was laid out the same year by a surveyor named Noble³ and letters to England praising the colony lured additional settlers. Some descriptions were so extraordinary that Friends' meetings in England posted cautionary broadsides. No wonder, if a letter written in the fall of 1677 is typical!

...Burlington...is a convenient place for
trade; it is about one hundred and fifty

miles up the river Delaware; the country and air seems to be very agreeable to our bodies, and we have very good stomachs to our victuals: Here is plenty of provision in the country; plenty of fish and fowl, and good venison very plentiful, and so much better than ours in England; for it eats not so dry, but is full of gravy, like fat young beef. You that come after us need not fear the trouble that we had, for now here is land ready divided against you come: The Indians are very loving to us, except here and there one, when they have gotten strong liquors in their heads, which they now greatly love: But for the country, in short, I like it very well; and I do believe, that this river of Delaware is as good a river as most in the world: It exceeds the river of Thames by many degrees.⁴

Christopher Wetherill

It is difficult, and often inappropriate, to attribute specific meaning or interpretation to human activity when the actor leaves no record. Nevertheless, it appears that Christopher Wetherill was motivated to leave England and settle in America for some of the same reasons expressed by his countrymen. Son of a merchant from Newcastle, Wetherill is listed among those imprisoned in 1661 in the Beverly Gaol "For attending religious meetings..."⁵ This bit of documentation tells not only of his involvement with the Quakers, but also that by 1661 he was in Yorkshire. He married Mary Hornby before 1672 and the birth of their four children is recorded in the minutes of the York Monthly Meeting. Mary Wetherill died in 1680, possibly in childbirth; their youngest child, Samuel, died in infancy the same year.

Persecuted for their religion, Quakers were also frequently harrassed in business. We do not know Christopher Wetherill's occupation or his connection, if any, with Byllynge's principal creditors. Did some friend, learning of the death of Mary, write a glowing description of Burlington which prompted Wetherill to leave England? Possibly. But leave he did, and to assure his continued good standing within Meeting, he arrived in Burlington with a certificate from the York Monthly Meeting.⁶ The date of his arrival is not documented, but the removal certificate is dated 1683.6 (August).2 and notes that Wetherill is a "widdower" with children. It is reasonable to assume that all three of his surviving children (Phebe, Thomas and John) accompanied him to Burlington.

In 1686, when his oldest child was fourteen, Christopher requested a certificate from Burlington Quarterly Meeting to go to Bucks County.⁷ Once there, he married Mary Fothergill (1687); they must have returned to Burlington because he is listed in the Burlington Court Book as a member of a jury in 1687.⁸ She died sometime prior to 1690 when Christopher married again. The third marriage was to Elizabeth Pope, a widow who inherited her husband's considerable holdings.

By 1693, Wetherill's name appears on a map of Burlington land owners. (Appendix A) In an Indenture dated 1699, he transferred a town lot and a sixteen acre parcel within town boundaries to his son-in-law Thomas Scattergood.⁹ Thomas, a carpenter, married Phebe Wetherill, Christopher's only daughter, before 1699. He lived and worked on High Street; that land, too, once belonged to Christopher.

Sadly, there are no extant diaries or letters to enhance a portrait of Christopher Wetherill. His legacy of action and involvement is substantiated through Quaker records. He served Burlington as Constable (1687/8 - 1688/9)¹⁰ and Sheriff (1700 and 1701)¹¹. He sat on both petty and grand juries¹² and was a member of the Proprietary Council of the Province in 1706 and 1707.¹³ Wetherill is listed among those present at meetings of the Council of Proprietors in 1703. The July 19 meeting culminated in two additional purchases from the Indians. The holdings "...amounting to, according to our best computation, the number of 150,000ac. at the least, the cost whereof to the Indians, with other incidental charges, will amount to the sum of £700."¹⁴

He married a fourth time in 1705; Mary Whitton Wetherill died shortly after. With the turn of the century, Christopher Wetherill saw Burlington eclipsed by William Penn's Philadelphia which was closer to the mouth of the Delaware. He died in 1711 and is buried in the Friends' Burying Ground in Burlington.¹⁵ He built his life around his beliefs and had the courage to confront a new world.

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Manuscript Collections

- Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Wetherill Genealogical Chart. Gen. Z44, p.79.
- Quaker Collection, Haverford College. Allinson Collection, Marriage Settlement of Thomas Scattergood, #968.

Maps

- Leeds, Daniel. "A Mapp of the Streets and Lotts of Land Laid out in the town of Burlington, Anno --1696."
- Woodward, Major E.M. "Map of the Town of Burlington, 1696"

The following is a list of Philadelphia area collections containing records helpful in genealogical research:

Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania
1300 Locust Street
Philadelphia
(215) 545-0391

Hours same as Historical
Society

Historical Society of Pennsylvania
1300 Locust Street
Philadelphia
(215) 732-6200

Mon 1-9pm
Tues - Fri 9-5

Friends Historical Library
Swarthmore College
Swarthmore, PA 19081
(215) 447-7496

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Quaker Collection
Haverford College
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Mon-Fri 9-12:30
1:30-4