

The Religious Society of Friends and Campbell County

(abridged)

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The Quakers brought to this part of Virginia the same hopes as countless others seeking freedom from religious persecution and political oppression in Europe. And, as others, they came trying to find a better life for themselves and their children in the New World.

While Quakerism, as a faith, is gone from the area, the blood of the early Quakers runs in many county families to this day.

As a religious body, the Quakers' beliefs and ways cut across the grain of the Old South. These members of the Religious Society of Friends, founded by George Fox in mid-17th Century England, took guidance, individually, directly from God. With this philosophy, they were in rebellion against ecclesiastical establishments, Puritan in New England and Episcopal in Virginia. The Friends provided a beacon and an asylum for those revolting against all outward restrictions on the practices of religion.

Yet the Quakers grew in numbers and continued to grow in America after Quakerism's period of initial growth in England had passed. Contributing to the spread of this faith here were the itinerant Quakers, who "felt a leading" to travel and preach, roaming the colonies to proclaim a gospel of man's free direct access to God, speaking in outdoor assemblies and by cabin fires. Ready to be imprisoned or die for their faith, these Quakers drew many to their faith and fold.

Also contributing to the growth of Quakerism was its system of meetings, an orderly system of worship and also of doing business under the peaceful guidance of "The Light." In those days, as in many Friends Meetings today, there was no paid ministry. This way of evangelizing and form of church government were well suited to the fluid conditions of 18th-Century America.

The beginning of the Quaker community in what is now Campbell County can be dated from 1754 when petition was made for the right to establish an organized public meeting. For several years prior to this, Quakers probably had been establishing homes and farms in the area between the James River and the earlier settlements at Flat Creek and New London. The leader of what was to become South River Meeting was Sarah Clark Lynch, a widow since the death of her husband, Charles Lynch, the elder, the previous year.

The daughter of Capt. Christopher Clark of Louisa County, Sarah Lynch, had joined the Quakers under the vigorous preaching of an itinerant North

Carolina Quaker, Joseph Newly, an early representative of the evangelists of the Great Awakening whose converts later would flock mainly to Methodism.

In those days, as in ours, the most recently converted were often the most zealous leaders, and Mrs. Lynch, while living on a farm south of where Lynchburg now is, invited her neighbors to hold "meetings for worship" in her home. These meetings continued for several years until the building of a wooden meeting house in 1775 on land given by the leader for that purpose.

The records suggest that the Quaker community of Campbell County, in the late 18th Century, included interrelated families, not all of whose members were Quakers in a given generation. Actually, from the records, it is difficult to distinguish newly converted families, from those such as the Terrills and Moorhans, whose Quaker roots can be traced back through earlier generations to conversion by 17th Century Quaker preachers in England. Such families had traveled to the Piedmont via Barbados/Charleston, S.C., and the southeastern counties of Virginia.

Some records indicate that the Clarks were fellow travelers with the Moorhans and Terrills as they set out for the Isle of Wight in 1669. Perhaps, one generation would fall away and the next would experience reconversion within the family tradition.

A number of Quakers moved into what became Campbell County from the northern colonies, lured by Gov. Gooch's "Inducements." But they made less of an impact than those who were already in Virginia.

A non-Quaker member of a Quaker family, who was nonetheless a fellow religious dissenter was Micaiah Clark, Sarah's brother, who was the surveyor of Jefferson's Bedford County properties. He built a house near Lawyers and established a small church for the use of preachers of all faiths; he said of religious denominations, "There is good in all, but none all good." The South River Quaker Meeting House, restored in 1901 by the Presbyterians (it had been damaged by cannon fire in the federal attack on Lynchburg in 1864), is the oldest religious structure in the county. It was probably the third formal site of worship, coming after Hat Creek and Flat Creek Presbyterian Churches.

The records of the South River Meeting, dating from 1757 to its "laying down" in 1858, are preserved in the archives of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting, which are kept in the library of Haverford College, near Philadelphia. These records show that William Gandler was the first clerk of the meeting and Bowling and Edward Clark, Sarah Lynch's brothers, the first overseers. While Quakers settled and remained for generations in the North, and later in the West, they were sojourners in all the South except North Carolina.

George Fox, in 1672, found Quakers on the edge of the Dismal Swamp when he slept at the fireside of the Moorhans family. The number of Quakers here, grew apace with those in the rest of the country, but sooner than

Since the South River Meeting House has been well researched, this paper deals mainly with the records of the rise and fall of the lower county meetings--Seneca and Hills Creek.

The South River Meeting records, already referred to, show that the monthly meeting, the basic formal unit, was held at the mother church with meetings for worship held in satellite settlements such as Goose Creek in Bedford County; on Banister River in Halifax County; and in the Seneca Creek area of Campbell County. "Monthly meetings" always took place at South River except once in the year 1757 when it was held at Goose Creek.

Other than moving westward, there was another option for the Quakers. This was to turn to Methodism.

The chief role of the Quaker community in Campbell County was as a taking-off point for the settlement of the Northwest Territory. The South River Meeting was the source of more westwardbound pioneers than any other meeting in Virginia. Quaker migration from the South was very significant in the settlement of the Northwest; in 1850 more than half the population of Indiana was said to have been Quaker descended.

The end of the Revolution provided the Quakers opportunity to move more safely west of the Alleghenies, and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 made the territory west of north of the Ohio free soil forever.

Early minutes of the South River Meeting urged members to educate their slaves. Step by step, the position hardened until in 1775 the Virginia Yearly Meeting called for expelling members who did not free their slaves. Subsequent minutes show that this was a difficult rule for members to adhere to for even after 1787 when all Quakers in Virginia were said to be free of slaves, continuing admonitions appear.

Actually, the Quakers' position of slavery was one that had developed toward its final statement in the end of the 18th Century. Although Fox had spoken against slavery, Quakers in general held slaves until the mid-18th Century when John Woolman, the "Quaker saint," appeared along the James and raised his voice against the slave system.

Patrik Henry freely praised the Quakers' refusal to hold slaves, although confessing he could himself not give up the convenience of this system. He supposed, he said, that every right-thinking man must acknowledge the rightness of the Quakers' position. As governor, Patrik Henry also approved the exemption of Quakers for military service.

While the Quakers, for some time, played a leading role in county events, westward migration was inevitable. A large group of robust men and women with a witness to bear to the world and an urge toward an active role in the community naturally would be at odds with the conservative Anglican-controlled Virginia, especially in a day in which the economy was based on slavery.

In other areas, inched westward ahead of the Anglican the collector. Few Quakers would be left in the South by the time of the Civil War.

The monthly meeting records of April 21, 1781, show that "as there are some Friends living on Molley's Creek and Seneca and also on Cheese Creek, Christopher and William Johnson and John Lynch are appointed to assist in appointing a suitable place for holding a meeting or meeting amongst them." In August it was recommended that the Friends of Molley's Creek and Seneca join to build a house to meet in "instead of the Friend's house where they have heretofore met," and that those of Hills Creek and Cheese Creek be permitted to meet "where they judge most convenient."

The pioneer core of Quaker settlers in the northwestern part of the county had been the Lynchs, Clarks, Terrells, Moormans, and Johnsons from Hanover and Louisa Counties. Those in the southern part of the county seem to have been mainly the second generation of some of these families including the Johnsons, Terrells, and Moormans.

It is difficult to pinpoint a family as to location and meeting. The Quakers participated actively in land speculating, which was the order of the day, and newcomers were regularly found "taking up" land in several places; a home on one property; a mill on another; and a son settled on still another. Thus the Davis family, which came from Shropshire, England, and early Quaker stronghold, moved into our area in 1782. The records show three of the four Davis brothers shifting between the Quaker meetings of Campbell and Bedford Counties. Mica'jah was for a time active in South River Meeting, having property in Lynchburg. At Hills Creek, he gave land for the meeting house; he laid out the town of Marysville, named for his wife, Mary Johnson, and applied to the legislature to incorporate the same (his grandiose schemes came to naught). William was first at Hills Creek and finally was one of the remnant who held a last meeting at South River.

Members of Hills Creek and Seneca Meetings are clearly identified only when they appear in the South River minutes: the Richard Blossom family at Hills Creek and then with James Butterworth at Seneca before moving on to Ohio where they became rich and prominent. There were also the Butlers, the Burgesses and Pidgeons at Hills Creek.

The leading families at Seneca Meeting were closely related branches of the old South River families of Johnson and Moorman. Members of the Johnson family are recorded as active in the meeting from its founding in the early 1800's when James was overseer... until 1809 when Mica'jah Johnson, who had earlier made his peace after being married by a "hire teacher," was again condemned for "misconduct." Other Seneca families were Betts, Hasley, Gregg, Stratton and Terrell.

Beginning with 1781, regular reports were made on the Seneca and Hills Creek Meetings. In April 1783, the committee doubts that the Seneca meeting is held to "any advantage but the Hills Creek Friends are more settled." In 1785 it was reported that "further care of Seneca is necessary," and in 1786 it was the judgement that "Hills Creek Meeting should be established... and that they have the liberty to build a house to meet in."

By 1790 some of the leaders of Hills Creek had moved away and Seneca took the ascendancy. In 1792 it was proposed, but in vain, that the two meetings join.

In 1794 the Friends at Seneca requested to "have their meeting established and to have the liberty to meet in where it shall appear most convenient." As to the size of the congregations, the South River financial record of 1792 shows the quarterly assessment apportioned thus: 4 pounds and 15 shillings to South River, one and 16 to Seneca, and one pound, 2 shillings 4 pence to Hills Creek. I can find only 18 family names associated with the two smaller meetings during their 29-year time span, among the 140 names associated with the entire South River Monthly Meeting during its 81 years. In terms of today's church membership, the numbers were small, but South River Meeting was the only place of worship near Lynchburg, and, except for the Presbyterian Church at Flat Creek, the three Quaker meeting houses were the only places of worship between the James and the Staunton.

In 1797 the Hills Creek and Seneca Meetings, which, heretofore, had been only places of meetings for worship, asked to form a joint "preparative" meeting, i.e. they would hold a business meeting each month to prepare for the monthly meeting at South River. This was approved under the name 'Seneca'. This was the period of highest activity in the Quaker community of Campbell County. After that, the individual course of the two small meetings declined rapidly.

The last mention of Hills Creek as a 'Friends' meeting was in 1803 when Isaac Pidgeon resigned as overseer. Seneca representatives appear regularly at South River until 1810. By this time Hills Creek has evidently folded, as the monthly meeting only concerns itself with whether meetings for worship might still be held to advantage at Seneca. The decision was "no."

In 1804-06 a large group, all with Seneca and Hills Creek names, moved west. After the War of 1812 more followed.

Until the early 1920's Seneca names can still be identified among the dwindling numbers at South River, but in 1824 a final report comes to the effect that the Seneca Meeting House "is now occupied by a family." It was probably located near the present village of Gladys.

Information about the fate of Hills Creek Meeting House comes from records of the Methodists who took over the site, and from Marion Dowdy's research into county records. Tradition at Lambs United Methodist Church is that the old log meeting house of the Friends was succeeded by a frame church about 1830. It seems probable that the Quakers' log building, which survived until the 20th Century, had been used for Methodist services earlier. The South Meeting was still flourishing when the early Methodists borrowed the Meeting house for services in the 1790's (the last Quaker meeting was held there in 1838), but the Hills Creek Meeting House may have been deserted by time the first Methodist circuit rider appeared.

There seems to be no evidence that any members of the Hills Creek Meeting became members of Lambs. However, the Clarks, near relatives of the Quakers, did so, and there were probably other members of the Hills Creek Quaker community who made the transition.

There is little record of the worship of our Quaker forefathers in this county. Doubtless they were influenced by the general movement of "quietism" which was the mood of Quakerism in the latter half of the 18th Century. Often the meetings would have been silent from beginning to end, waiting for a "moving of the spirit."

An April 1789 entry in the diary of the New England mystic Job Scott refers to a visit to Hills Creek, Seneca and South River Meetings "...in all we were helped through to our comfort and, we hope, to some profit."

Whether the "messages" were directed to the social concerns which occupied the business meetings, we do not know, or how often to matters more purely of the spirit. Mainly, the record shows the pastoral concern of the pioneer Quaker community for the behavior of its own members in a turbulent age. When members of the meeting were directly concerned, they faced issues squarely, even if with the slow patience so perplexing to outsiders.

By the second third of the 18th Century, the original hope that Quakerism would become a universal church had been abandoned. The task, instead, was to "perfect a spiritual remnant, a little Zion, a peculiar people" set apart, hedged around...the Lord's very arm."

The cost of trying to maintain the "little Zion" was high. Disownment was for "adultery and beating two persons," owning a slave, attending military exercises and swearing solemn oaths to being married by "a hireling priest," drinking, fiddling and gaming.

The most notable Quaker in the county who was lost in departing from Quaker principles was Charles Lynch Jr. He was disowned, apparently after extended efforts to win him back, when, in 1764, he had to "swear a solemn oath" to become a member of the House of Burgesses.

Being married to non-members by hireling priests was a principal cause of limiting the growth of Quakerism. Of this number was the founder, herself, Sarah Clark Lynch who married Capt. (later major) John Ward of the Episcopal faith. John and Thomas Moorman, who married non-Quaker girls, were promptly read out of the meeting. The Moormans promptly turned to Methodism, the result being the founding of White's Church.

Actually, many of those testified against for such youthful offenses as fiddling and drinking saw the error of their ways and wrote letters condemning their offenses. Luxuries and fine clothes were not the temptation here that they were said to have been in, say, Philadelphia.

The Quakers left behind their testimonies to the world on peace and human freedom which they had so struggled over.

A concrete legacy is the handsome South River Meeting House, restored with its "facing benches" looking down on the plain pine benches of the congregation. And nearby the well-preserved cabin of pioneer Quaker Christopher Johnson.

Owing its origin to the Quakers is Grace Baptist Church, a mile or so from the old Hills Creek Meeting. An Indiana Quaker returned to the country after

the Civil War to grant property he had inherited to former slaves of the old Clark plantation, and to build a church and schoolhouse for them.

While traces are faint today of the Quaker community, which added diversity to the development of the county, knowledge of it brings new significance to other bits of our history. The record reveals the Quakers as having had some of our own foibles, some rigid attitudes we can feel condescending toward, and courage we can admire. One hopes that those individuals who, a century and a half ago, chose to remain Virginians rather than Quakers, kept with them and passed on some characteristics of probity in relationships, of seeking unvarnished spiritual truth, of "answering that of God in every man."