

Cropwell Meeting at 200: Celebrating Burlington County's Quaker Heritage

Speech given by Joe Laufer at the 200th anniversary celebration of the Cropwell Friends Meeting House, Evesham Township, NJ on June 28, 2009.

Fifteen years ago—in 1994—Burlington County celebrated its Tercentenary— 300 years as a County in the State of New Jersey. I had the privilege of serving on the Official Tercentenary Committee under the auspices of the Burlington County Office of Cultural and Heritage Affairs. Through that appointment, I was introduced to the phenomenal history of this great county. You see, I'm a transplant to New Jersey and Burlington County, arriving here in 1970. As a part of the Tercentenary Committee, I began to learn about the vital role Quakerism played in the history and character of Burlington County.

And one by one, as I went from community to community I began counting the number of Friends Meeting Houses which prompted further research, leading me to an awareness of the initial colonization of the county by Quakers who arrived here in 1677 and 1678 on Ships called the Kent, the Shield, and later the Willing Mynde and the Martha. All of a sudden names of friends and colleagues like Haines, Lippincott, Evans, Allen, Zelle, Roberts and others took on new meaning, as I was able to identify them as descendants of early Quaker settlers. I almost became obsessed with learning everything I could about the Quakers of Burlington County, taking pictures of all the Quaker Meeting Houses, the schoolhouses, the burial grounds and collecting historic pictures of the meeting houses through the generosity of friends like Coles Roberts, leading to the creation of a slide show out of my newly found knowledge, which then led to the publication of a leaflet sponsored by the county, then a series of articles in the Burlington County Times and ultimately to an invitation to be the only non-Quaker to serve on the committee to help plan Cropwell 's 200th anniversary.

PART I: THE QUAKERS AND BURLINGTON COUNTY

Before getting to the specifics of Cropwell, on this, the bicentennial of the construction of its place of worship, let me summarize the nature and significance of the Quaker influence on Burlington County: It goes back to 1672, when George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends in England, visited West Jersey and Burlington County. We have a record of the actual date he visited our county—July 12, 1672- 337 years ago. He was deeply impressed—and when he returned to England, I'm sure he told William Penn about this area. And so it was that as the Quakers left England to escape persecution and suppression, it was natural that they would settle in a place already familiar to their founder.

William Penn was chosen by Fox to arbitrate a dispute between John Fenwick and Edward Byllynge over land in

West Jersey in 1674 (Penn was only 30 years old at the time—and it would be **six years** before he would turn his attention to Pennsylvania and his holy experiment there). This prompted Penn's writing of the Concessions and Agreements of 1677, which guaranteed representative government, fair treatment of Native Americans and civil rights and religious freedom and protection for all inhabitants—setting the tone for the quality of life that would be a hallmark of Burlington County through the years.

According to Edwin P. Tanner, the purchase of West Jersey in 1674 is an event of the greatest historical significance for it marks the beginning of the first great Quaker experiment in American Colonization. And of course, the Concessions and Agreements became the prototype of the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution. Because of Penn's six year involvement in the matters of West Jersey before his connection with Pennsylvania, I contend that Burlington County deserves the title of "Cradle of American Liberty"—over Philadelphia!

The Quaker colonists went right to work to establish schools, meeting houses and burial grounds throughout Burlington County, starting first in Burlington City. By 1681 there were 1,400 Quakers in Burlington County. Records show that in 1699 the "Friends" were more numerous in Burlington County than all other counties in the Delaware Valley.

Today, there are 21 Quaker Meeting Houses in Burlington County, some active, and some "laid down" (the Quaker term for being abandoned and turned over for other uses). Some communities have two meeting houses, as a result of the "Hicksite Separation" in 1827 -- a reform movement which created a splinter group which separated "Orthodox" from "Hicksite" believers. Fortunately, in 1952, the 300th Anniversary of the founding of Quakerism by George Fox in England, there was a reunification of all Quakers into one body of believers. Most interestingly, Cropwell was one of the few Meetings that was hardly affected by the Hicksite Separation. It remained Orthodox throughout, and those few who were drawn to Hicksite beliefs were encouraged to worship at other nearby Hicksite meetings, such as Upper Evesham (Medford) or Haddonfield.

(Call attention to professional photographer Dorann Weber's Photo Exhibit of Burlington County's Quaker Meetinghouses at this event)

10 Active Meetings:

- Mount Holly
- Moorestown
- Mount Laurel
- Medford (Union St.)
- Westfield
- Cropwell
- Crosswicks
- Rancocas

- Arney's Mount
- Mansfield

9 "Laid Down"

- Bordentown
- Burlington (Conference Center)
- Copany
- Upper Springfield
- Vincentown
- Medford (Main St.)
- Crosswicks (2)
- Easton
- Moorestown (School)

2 "Marginal or Contested"

- Coopertown
- Colemantown

These Quaker Meeting houses were strategically located to provide reasonable travel time to attend worship and to deal with mutual safety during the early days of colonization. One can make a tour of all 21 Burlington County Quaker Meeting houses with the shortest distance between them ranging from 4 to 8 miles. A complete circuit of the 21 meeting houses covers a total distance of 91 miles.

There's one other very significant local Quaker connection whose influence goes far beyond the borders of Burlington County— and that's the man who has been called the most famous Quaker of all, **John Woolman**, who was born in the village of Rancocas in October of 1720, operated a tailor shop in Mt. Holly, and died in England in October, 1772. As an itinerant Quaker preacher traveling throughout the American Colonies, he advocated against conscription, military taxation and particularly slavery. His Journal, published posthumously, summarized his views and inspired many an abolitionist. His inspiration and the activism of many Burlington County Quakers played a major role in the success of the Underground Railroad movement in Burlington County, contributing to the creation of numerous parallel communities, a recent publication refers to them, of freed and escaped slaves throughout Burlington County.

PART II: CROPWELL

Now, let me talk about this very significant anniversary of Cropwell. I have a very distinct advantage when speaking about the anniversary, because we have souvenir documents from the 100th anniversary in 1909 and from the 150th in 1959. It seems that Cropwell Quakers have a penchant for celebrating anniversaries. And it just so happens that the planners of the 150th had no qualms about using the material from the 100th anniversary for their anniversary booklet. Quaker practicality prevailed and they decided not to reinvent the wheel—so I guess its OK to do the same by making references to the previous anniversaries. In 1909 Elizabeth Evans provided a brief 2-page history of Cropwell, while William Zellely came up with 18 pages of very detailed historical facts.

An introduction in the 1959 commemorative booklet refers back to what Elizabeth L. Evans wrote as an introduction to the 1909 booklet—and it applies here today just as it did then. I quote:

This old Meeting House, wherein Friends have assembled for worship for the past one hundred years, is still in a very well preserved condition; in fact it has stood almost unchanged while time and man have altered many of its surroundings.

The 1959 introduction continues:

The same might be said of the Meeting today. The horse sheds are gone, the railroad has gone, even the old Marlton Pike has been supplanted by the roaring dual highway, Route 70.

Now, fifty years later, we still meet in the silent worship so dear to our ancestors, the "practice of the presence of God" carries on."

Today, in 2009, we need only add 50 more years of almost invasive development and construction, but with the same conclusion penned by Elizabeth Evans.

We should make it clear that we are celebrating the anniversary of the building—the place of worship—not of the establishment of the Quaker community here. That actually dates back 223 years to 1786 when the Quakers here began worshiping in private homes, and then eventually in a 1792 schoolhouse constructed on this property. It appears that the Cropwell Quakers were in no hurry to build the Meeting House—it took a full 23 years before they laid the first brick. Even after receiving permission in 1794 from Haddonfield Quarterly Meeting to build and having funds available through bequests, they waited several years to begin.

One thing about Cropwell is that this is the *original* meeting house. In some of the other communities, they first built a wooden place of worship, and it burned down, and was followed by a brick structure, and then, in some cases a third generation building replaced the second one. **But Cropwell is unique in that this is the one and only!**

I should say something about the name Cropwell. There's a community in Nottinghamshire County in England

called Cropwell Bishop. The town is truly ancient, dating back to at least 1086 (20 years after the Battle of Hastings!) according to a survey taken at the time. A Google search on the Internet tells me that "The picturesque village of Cropwell Bishop lies between the Vale of Belvoir and the plain of the River Trent, one mile south of Cropwell Butler and four miles south east of Bingham. It is situated on the east side of the Nottingham to Grantham Canal which passes within a few hundred yards of the village centre. The name Cropwell is derived from a round hill between the villages of Cropwell Bishop and Cropwell Butler. Cropwell means "with a crop or hump". The village is also home to Cropwell Bishop Creamery, famous for its award winning stilton and other cheeses.

We can make the connection with Cropwell Bishop through William Matlack, a Quaker who arrived in Burlington County in 1677 on the Kent and was indentured to Thomas Ollive, the Quaker landowner and founder of Wellingborough (Willingboro) for having paid for his passage from England to Burlington County.

According to Dennis Weaver of Maple Shade, Cropwell is thought to have been the first name for Chester Township (which included Moorestown, Maple Shade and Cinnaminson) and eventually the southern branch of Pennsauken Creek was called Cropwell—and the current Burlington County Map shows a stream which crosses under Route 73 north of the Marlton Circle as Cropwell Brook.

Interestingly, in his narrative in 1909, Zellely acknowledges the strong family ties to Nottingham's Cropwell, but he prefers to accept the commonly accepted theory that the name was applied on account of the fertility of the soil which "crops well here about."

Perhaps more than any other Friends Meeting in Burlington County, Cropwell merits being called an "oasis". And today, with the installation of the commemorative Peace Pole, we have another excuse to come here to meditate and pray, insulated from the commercial chaos just beyond the perimeter of this sacred place because Quakers considered the natural pastoral setting essential to connecting with the Almighty.

In his 1909 remarks, William Zellely points out another unique aspect of Cropwell Meeting—because of the lateness of its construction, it was spared the desecration which was unleashed on fledgling Quaker Meeting Houses during what he calls "the national conflict" when military troops of both the US Militia and Great Britain occupied the meetings in Mt. Laurel, Mt. Holly, Springfield and Crosswicks.

I already mention tried and true Quaker names with some connection to Cropwell, such as William Matlack and Thomas Ollive. As one reads the documents and archives of the period, it is impossible to miss the Quaker interconnections throughout Burlington County. For instance, Dennis Weaver connects Cropwell with the Chesterford one-room Schoolhouse in Maple Shade through Samuel Burrough Sr., who died in 1793. Burrough owned a plantation in Evesham and others in different parts of Burlington County from which rents were obtained. Some of the income from these properties was applied to the building of Cropwell Meeting (when the time was fitting, according to the trustees!).

Burrough also helped in the purchase of the land for the Chesterford School, which incidentally was built in

1811—only two years after Cropwell. Weaver suggests that probably some of the leftover bricks from Cropwell were used to construct Chesterford School. The clay for the bricks, by the way, was quarried locally and baked in Samuel Lippincott's kiln. The lime was ferried by boat from Pennsylvania and was transported to Cropwell by boat.

Concerning the construction, the folks at Cropwell took their good old time to get the job done. Haddonfield Quarterly had approved the construction in 1794. Detailed plans weren't drawn up until 1805—11 years later! Then it took another 4 years to get the job done, with completion being recorded on August 31, 1809.

The final bill for the construction came to \$1,767, and through careful Quaker management, there was a surplus of \$17.99 which was used to paint the doors and window shutters.

I had already mentioned the fact that Cropwell was hardly affected by the Hicksite separation in 1827. It remained Orthodox throughout the revolt. But it also has another claim to fame in the annals of Quakerism. On October 25, 1917 the first joint business meeting of the men and women was conducted. They had met separately since the meeting was formed in 1786, as was the universal Quaker custom—and by taking this step in 1917 they set a precedent for fellow Quakers in the region. While the may have been slow in getting their building constructed, they were ahead of their time in the category of women's rights!

I began by mentioning common Burlington County Quaker names. Over the years I have visited every Quaker burial ground in Burlington County—and wherever I go there is a core of the same names. And when you look at the first rolls of members at Cropwell, these are the names you find: Enoch Evans, William Reeve, Thomas Lippincott, Amos Asherd, Samuel Shinn, Job Collyins, John Harris, Burzill Braddock and Ephraim Stratton. It is fitting that their names be mentioned at this Bicentennial celebration in the place that they worshipped. We owe much to these groundbreakers. Burlington County owes much to all the early Quakers who set the tone for the quality of life and the spirit of brotherhood that permeates its rich history.

Let me close by reading the poem penned by Paul S. Lippincott, Jr. on March 12, 1959 for the 150th anniversary:

A POEM

We gather week by week
As our forebears did of yore
Seeking that Inner Peace
And of strength and guidance more.

As to form of worship
A century and a half ago
Our way today has changed but little

As far as we might know.

We gather in the quiet
As Friends were wont before
Our souls seek out to find
Humility to open wide the door.

As worldly thoughts are put aside
Our fervent, silent prayers pour out
The Presence In The Midst is felt
Hope replaces doubt.

We look back upon our lives
And see the sins so plain
With contrite hearts we ask
"Dear Christ Please make the pages white again."

With souls refreshed and made anew
May we go forth from here
Seeking God's will for us
In all we're called to do.

Joseph M Laufer. Remarks at Bicentennial Program Cropwell Friends Meeting Sunday, June 28, 2009

Laufer published this as a PDF on [Issuu in 2009](#) (no longer very accessible). According to a Facebook post on Lines on the Pines account, he died in 2014. Issuu screenshots re-digitized 2023.