

Historical Overview of the Woodlawn Quaker Meeting

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Martha Claire Catlin, Historian

Alexandria Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Virginia's first Quakers had immigrated to America to escape religious persecution in England. Unlike those who settled along the Delaware River in West Jersey or Pennsylvania, however, Virginia's early Quakers, and those who visited the colony from England, were met with persecution, causing many to flee or to be banished from the colony in the 17th century. Some who left Virginia joined other British Quakers in settling the Delaware Valley beginning in the 1680s, once Penn's establishment of a Quaker-led colony offered a haven for Quaker domestic life and social values. The Woodlawn settlers brought with them a strong commitment to social equality and justice. The basis of Penn's "holy experiment" was the central Quaker belief that every person has "that of God" within. Thus, all were equal in God's eyes and, by extension, in human society. As a result, Penn's colony fostered traditions of toleration of other beliefs, good relations with the Indians, cooperative interaction between agrarian communities and small towns, and educational opportunities for all children. Quakers questioned the morality of slavery, and by 1775 eliminated slaveholding among their membership. They also valued industriousness and many grew prosperous, both as businessmen and farmers. Most strove to maintain an absolute testimony for peace in personal and public life. In manner, speech, dress, and way of life, they sought to practice honesty and simplicity.

At the time of the American Revolution, many Quaker settlers from the established communities of the mid-Atlantic area migrated to the Shenandoah frontier, bringing a Quaker presence back to Virginia, though far removed from early Virginia Friends' meeting communities to the east, along the James and York Rivers and tributaries and on Virginia's eastern shore. However, by century's end, unable to reconcile their beliefs and economic practices with those of a slave state, these settlers began to leave Virginia, most migrating west. Between 1800 and 1820, Quaker meetings in Virginia were reduced in number from sixty-three to thirty-two.¹

Those Quakers who remained in Virginia continued opposition to slavery, through the press, through anti-slavery organizations, and through support of free blacks. The Quaker presence continued to be challenged in Virginia because of their anti-slavery beliefs. Quakers were pressured into leaving the Commonwealth through boycotts and intimidation. One subjected to repeated threats was Samuel M. Janney, a well-known Loudoun County Friend. Nonetheless, Janney persisted in his attempts to enlist anti-slavery northerners in bringing slavery to an end. In the early 1840s, prior to the arrival of the Woodlawn Quakers, he solicited and obtained financial backing for publication of his anonymous articles, not only in the northern press but also in the *Alexandria Gazette* and the Richmond *Whig*. His well-circulated articles publicized the successes of Northern Virginia farmers and advocated a free economy to be achieved through agricultural

reform. The articles succeeded in attracting northern settlers to Virginia, and, in turn, influenced movement away from slaveholding in the area. According to Chalkley Gillingham's account, when he had sought specific information on Virginia land for establishing the settlement he envisioned, he wrote to John Hampden Pleasants, editor of the Richmond *Whig*, who provided specific information on the availability of the Woodlawn Tract for purchase.

When Delaware Valley Quaker families began settling Woodlawn in 1846, few Quaker meetings remained in Virginia. The Virginia Yearly Meeting had been laid down and only Northern Virginia could be said to have a noticeable Quaker presence. Located in Waterford and Alexandria, these Northern Virginia meetings, which were of the Hicksite persuasion, had originally belonged, both administratively and culturally, to the Hicksite Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. The Woodlawn Friends became an administrative part of the Alexandria Monthly Meeting, which had been in existence as part of the Fairfax Quarter, located in Waterford, since the 1780s. While never a large group, by the 1840s the Alexandria Quakers had, like their earlier counterparts in the Virginia Yearly Meeting sphere, dwindled in number and viability as a Meeting. The newcomers, whose chosen representatives, almost from the outset, participated in the Monthly Meeting of Ministers and Elders alongside the Alexandria Friends. By providing an infusion of spiritual vitality based on the Hicksite ideal of augmenting religious devotion with social activism, the Woodlawn settlers renewed the Meeting community as a whole.² Although Woodlawn's location and the difficulty of travel could have been isolating, the existing network of Quarterly Meetings and Baltimore Yearly Meeting enabled the Woodlawn Friends to function both independently and as a part of a larger meeting community encompassing portions of Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia.

Because of the settlers' origins, a wealth of family, social, financial, and spiritual ties were also retained with the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and its network of Quarterly and Monthly Meetings. Travel among these meeting areas was frequent and an accepted part of life for many Woodlawn Quakers.

The lands that would become one to two hundred-acre farms were purchased in 1846 by the Troth-Gillingham Company from Lorenzo Lewis, son of Nellie Custis and Lawrence Lewis. Members of the Troth-Gillingham Company included Chalkley Gillingham, Jacob Troth, Lucas Gillingham, and Paul Hillman Troth. The 2,030-acre parcel, known as the Woodlawn Tract, had been carefully selected from the Mount Vernon estate by George Washington for his adopted daughter, Martha Washington's granddaughter, Nellie Custis. The Woodlawn tract sold for approximately \$12.50 per acre, and consisted of a combination of timber lands, meadows, and cropland. The wealth of old-growth timber was especially valuable, because timber rights and harvesting of oaks for shipbuilding by the Troth-Gillingham Company contributed to the land's affordability and readiness for farming by purchasers of the smaller tracts. The Company established its milling operation at nearby Accotink and for eight years, filled orders for ships' planks to a

number of shipbuilders, notably Johnson Rideout Shipyards in Bath, Maine, and Page & Allen in Portsmouth, Virginia.³

After purchase of the Woodlawn property, the mansion served as the first location for meeting for worship, and as a home base when the Quaker settlers first moved to the area and began building their own homes. The mansion was sold in 1853 to John Mason, the Baptist abolitionist who joined his New Jersey friends in their anti-slavery endeavor. Within six years, over forty families had purchased Woodlawn farmland or additional acreage from Washington's heirs and others.

The low price of land, especially as compared to Northern prices, may have been sufficient incentive to bring many non-Quaker Northerners to the area during the mid-19th century, when some 200 Northern families, averaging six per family, moved to Fairfax County.⁴ However, to the Woodlawn settlers, the low cost of land would simply be one factor in demonstrating that Virginia lands could be profitably farmed without slavery. Their own agricultural abilities, developed on farms in the Delaware Valley and elsewhere in the mid-Atlantic region, gave them confidence that they could achieve this goal. In addition, agricultural methods and “scientific farming” were subjects of intense interest at mid-century, even in the urban intellectual dialogue of Alexandria and the Federal City. Among the most articulate of Northern Virginia Quaker proponents of scientific farming were Benjamin Hallowell and Samuel M. Janney. Their interest was not unrelated to their anti-slavery activities, which they pursued with others, including non-Quakers, in their work with the Benevolent Society, established by Hallowell and others in 1827 “to render assistance to freed slaves.” Hallowell, an educator who served as the first president of the Maryland Agricultural College, also explored and promoted these ideas through a number of other important Alexandria institutions, including the Lyceum, the Library Company, and the Hallowell School. Hallowell’s good friend Chalkley Gillingham, before coming to Woodlawn, served as secretary to the Burlington County Agricultural Society, which he was instrumental in forming in 1847. Gillingham was also known among the Hicksite Friends of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting as a Quaker minister who regularly found an audience with local African-American congregations and a frequent traveler among Quaker Meetings. In 1841, Gillingham joined Lucretia Mott, the Quaker abolitionist who would later become well-known for her advocacy for women’s rights, on a six-week sojourn to spread Quaker testimonies in remote areas of west-central Pennsylvania. The venture was referred to by Mott as “a long journey over the mountains to Centre Quar^{ly} M^g and Fishing Creek M^g, by appointment of the Yearly M^g . . . [with] Chalkley Gillingham, a new Minister . . . also on the appointment.”⁵

The 1850s were a golden period for the Woodlawn Quaker farmers, if only in retrospect, in light of the devastation that would come with the Civil War. These pre-war years were characterized by a flurry of community building, including land purchases, establishment of farms and businesses, the building of homes, schools, and the Woodlawn

Meetinghouse. The nearby village of Accotink was given renewed life as the commercial center for the area. In addition to the sawmill, Accotink boasted a gristmill, blacksmith shop, school, general store and post office, along with a few homes. Best known in the village was the large dwelling of Paul Hillman Troth, later known as the Haines house for his successor at the mill. Troth built onto and operated an existing mill and would later (in the 1870s) engage in shipbuilding at Accotink.

Throughout these years, the settlers befriended and supported economic independence and land ownership by free African-Americans in the Woodlawn neighborhood and at Gum Springs, the nearby free black community established by West Ford. Ford, who had obtained his freedom through Hannah Washington's will, financed the purchase of his land with the proceeds from a bequest of land from George Washington's nephew, Bushrod Washington. Gillingham and other Friends sold land in the Woodlawn area to a number of free blacks, including the Quander and Holland families. Given the care that would have been taken to avoid discovery, no concrete evidence has been found to verify the common belief that Quakers of the Woodlawn neighborhood were active in the Underground Railroad. However, by assisting their free black neighbors, they made their support known.⁶ Gum Springs native Judith Saunders Burton chronicles Quaker support for free schools for African American children in the 1860s and 1870s.⁷ Chalkley Gillingham's journal also recorded his involvement, and the Society of Friends' funding, of schools for black children both at Woodlawn and Gum Springs.⁸

During the Civil War, the Woodlawn Quakers were faced, first with control of the area south of Alexandria by Southern troops in 1861, and then occupation of the neighborhood and the meetinghouse by Northern troops, as part of the defenses of Washington. In his journal entries from 1861 to 1872, Chalkley Gillingham described the difficulties of this period, during which he and other settlers who chose not to return north, attempted to cope with military occupation in the midst of tremendous anxiety, disruption, and tragedy. While their anti-war convictions were accepted and even admired by some of the soldiers, they were also a source of suspicion and hostility from both armies, and as a result, some Quakers were imprisoned or harmed. At the close of the war, Gillingham recorded in his journal how he was sought out, because of his belief in nonviolence, to serve as foreman of a U.S. Grand Jury to indict Jefferson Davis for treason as a co-conspirator in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Over his protests, he was ordered to Norfolk to the Grand Jury, where it was expected, correctly, that his Quaker testimony would prevent him from voting for the death penalty.⁹ According to the rules of the Grand Jury, Gillingham's vote against the death penalty was not sufficient to prevent an indictment. Although other indicted co-conspirators were hanged, Davis was never brought to trial.

Some of the families who returned north or moved west during the war never returned. Those who remained settled into farming and carried the weight of the Alexandria Monthly Meeting. Unlike Woodlawn's, the Monthly Meeting's Alexandria membership

never revived. While the Woodlawn Meetinghouse was doubled in size in 1869, the meetinghouse in Alexandria was eventually no longer needed and was sold by the Meeting in 1885. Woodlawn then became the site of the Alexandria Monthly Meeting in an alternating pattern with the I Street Meeting in Washington.¹⁰

The twentieth century again brought the military to this pacifist community, as Quaker families and the neighboring Woodlawn African-American community were displaced by the U. S. Army, first by Camp A.A. Humphreys during World War I, then Fort Belvoir with World War II. Many historic sites from the mid-19th-century settlement era were consumed, including the Gillingham farm and much of the Village of Accotink. The Holland family, along with the Woodlawn United Methodist Church and its local Woodlawn congregation, moved north to join the Gum Springs community, which was growing, in part to house soldiers barred from segregated base housing. The historic church cemetery remains, surrounded by Fort Belvoir. The Woodlawn Meetinghouse and its cemetery also remain, an in-holding on the army base. The original wood-frame Woodlawn Baptist Church is gone, and is survived by a later building along with its historic cemetery. Woodlawn Plantation and Jacob M. Troth's nearby home, "Grand View" survive, along with the sweep of open land down to Dogue Creek.

The Alexandria Monthly Meeting continues to use the meetinghouse, coming together for silent worship on "First Day" (Sunday) mornings, and for potluck suppers and fellowship "in the manner of Friends." They continue to be engaged in improving social welfare within the neighboring community, as well as furthering Quaker testimonies, nationally and world-wide, regarding peace-making, the death penalty, education, hunger, and social justice. The gravestones of descendants of the founding families and others continue to be added to the still active burial ground, meetings for worship for the purpose of marriage continue to take place under the care of the Meeting, and children are instructed and nurtured in ways that differ little from years past.

So many years later, the words of Hannah Troth echo to us from her new Woodlawn home in 1852, as she writes her sister, Elizabeth Gibbs, about the Mount Vernon area, which she refers to as "Old Virginia":

It is a most beautiful country and some of the scenery is such as those living in Jersey have never imagined: still we all know there is bitter mixed with sweet everywhere.¹¹

While some beautiful scenery still endures, the Woodlawn Meetinghouse no longer sits within the agrarian landscape as created by the Woodlawn Quaker settlers in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, the survival of the meetinghouse as created at that time has allowed it to continue to embody a living tradition of Quaker values within the "bitter mixed with the sweet" of a changed and changing world.

Endnotes

¹ Jay Worrall, Jr., *The Friendly Virginians: America's First Quakers*, (Iberian Publishing Company, Athens, Georgia, 1994): 304.

² Recognized as an Indulged Meeting in 1847, the Woodlawn Meeting became a Preparative Meeting under the care of the older Alexandria Monthly Meeting in 1860, and eventually, a longstanding three-way interrelationship among Alexandria, Woodlawn and Washington evolved, the three venues together comprising the Alexandria Monthly Meeting, of Fairfax Quarter. All were by then administratively under Baltimore Yearly Meeting, which had superseded Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1790.

³ The Johnson Rideout shipyard built the full-rigged ship *Cynosure* in 1853, and the sailing ship *Edgar P. Stringer* in 1854, during the time when timber was supplied from the Troth-Gillingham Company. Page & Allen Shipyard was engaged in constructing *Neptune's Car*, completed in 1853, and believed to be the only large clipper ever built in Virginia. The company invited shipbuilder William Cramp of Philadelphia to order timber but records exist only for 1853-54 and do not confirm that any timber was supplied. Quakers' association with the shipbuilding industry is longstanding and many early Philadelphia shipwrights were Quakers.

⁴ Nan Netherton, Donald Sweig, Janice Artemel, Patricia Hickin, and Patrick Reed, *Fairfax County Virginia: A History* (Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, Fairfax, Virginia): 259.

⁵ Hallowell, Anna Davis, ed. *James and Lucretia Mott. Life and Letters*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company. The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1896: 220-221.

⁶ An analogous situation is described by Tony Cohen in his assessment of Quaker activities relating to the Underground Railroad in the Sandy Spring Quaker community in Montgomery County, Maryland. Cohen, Anthony. *The Underground Railroad in Montgomery County, Maryland: A History and Driving Guide*. Montgomery County Historical Society, 1994, Revised 1997.

⁷ Burton, Judith Saunders. *A History of Gum Springs, Virginia: A Report of a Case Study of Leadership in a Black Enclave*. Doctoral project, Vanderbilt University, 1986.

⁸ Buckman, Christine, Christy DeButts, Tom Fox, eds. *The Journal of Chalkley Gillingham: Friend in the Midst of the Civil War*. Alexandria Monthly Meeting, Alexandria, Virginia, n.d.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Records and Minutes of the Alexandria Monthly Meeting. Swarthmore College, Philadelphia.

¹¹Muir, Dorothy Troth. *Potomac Interlude: The Story of Woodlawn Mansion and the Mount Vernon Neighborhood, 1846 - 1943*:67. Dorothy Troth Muir, 1943. Library of Congress Catalog # 43-5990.

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