North Carolina Quaker Education: Historical Context

by James Simmons, Guilford College, 2014

In discussing the history of Quaker education in North Carolina, a cultural background of the Quaker community as a whole helps to grasp key terms and concepts. Local historian Mary Browning distills the Quaker education philosophy aphoristically by saying, "Friends valued learning for its own sake, and others favored practical training in skills and trades, and education for girls."[1] Learning "for its own sake" is a lasting characteristic of the Quaker tradition, and has historically been so because of education's role in the tenets and structure of Quakerism.

The Society of Friends's meeting organization was invaluable to the development of education in North Carolina due to its focus on, and ability to spread, information and advice throughout the Quaker community. It was in the second half of the seventeenth century that George Fox, founder of the Quaker faith, noticed a need for this structure within the religion. Fox developed this structure in the form of yearly, quarterly, and monthly meetings: yearly meetings, held with as many members and leaders of subordinate meetings as possible, address affairs of the church, and serve an advisory function in religious and educational matters; quarterly meetings, drawing members from a smaller area than yearly meetings, have historically made collections of money and letters of advice for the poor to encourage growth and development; and monthly meetings look after the needy of the immediate community.

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[1] Browning 19.

These Quaker meetings were, from the early eighteenth century onward, vital to setting up and maintaining schools in North Carolina. Early North Carolina relied heavily on private education due to the lack of public schools in the middle of the eighteenth century, thus most North Carolina Quaker schools formed in or around the meeting house and would depend heavily on support from monthly meetings, which came, in turn, from the pockets of Friends all over the East Coast.

The first school not designed specifically for Protestant clergy in North Carolina was a school opened by Charles Griffen in 1709.[2] Working as a "reader for the vestry," Griffen opened two schools located near Salem and Chowan County. These schools focused on cleanliness, industriousness, care, and rest. All of this can be found in a letter by William Gordon to the Secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel that aspired to draw attention to the growing presence of Quaker education in North Carolina. Gordon describes the education as such: "The Quakers themselves send their children to his school, though he had prayers twice a day at least, and obliged them to their responses, and all decency of behavior."[3] From this small start, Quaker meetings made a great and deliberative move to educate both Quakers and non-Quakers in North Carolina.

Throughout the eighteenth century, monthly meetings of North Carolina—in collaboration with the North Carolina Yearly Meeting and the Baltimore Association of Friends—would put together teams of advisors, per Quaker custom, to assist in planning, building, and promoting schools. During a quarterly meeting in 1715 the Friends of Little River resolved to affirm the role of the monthly meeting, "If there be some poor friends who are not able to school their children, then the Monthly Meeting that they do belong to should take some care that such have necessary careing [*sic*]."[4] The education these Friends sought developed over time and based itself as a "simple moral and religious education" that "united with a very elementary literary

[2] Smith 16.
[3] Klain 36.
[4] Klain 50.

training"[5] and is commonly referred to as a "guarded education," focusing on keeping children from bad influences while introducing them to positive representations of the Quaker faith. The push from the N.C. Yearly Meeting and others was due "no doubt to the consciousness of the greater educational needs commensurate with a people living with a young nation rapidly becoming powerful,"[6]which manifested in the donations of supplies and advice from Baltimore and Philadelphia Friends.

Despite having so much outside support, many monthly meetings struggled in the nineteenth century due to western immigration caused by "the increasing seriousness of the slavery question."[7] Many such meetings closed, bringing on a period of hardship for monthly meeting schools. Not long after the first quarter of the century, however, the yearly meeting of 1829 developed a plan to place books in the hands of all the Quakers that the N.C. Yearly Meeting could reach, called the Library Movement; in tandem to this action there was a movement to solidify and establish more schools with strict care. In 1831 and 1832, the N.C. Yearly Meeting recommended to monthly meetings the "subject of primary schools," and further suggested that the monthly meetings set up permanent committees to "have care of the schools."[8] Monthly meetings thus selected teachers, established the Bible as a textbook, and planned to visit and observe the condition of schools, passing their observations upward to the quarterly meetings who would concordantly pass it along to the N.C. Yearly Meeting. These reports focused on illuminating the number of *select schools* (Quaker-only school), the number of mixed schools, the number of schools taught by Quakers, and the number of schools taught by non-Quakers for half a century. This administrative method helped to establish and maintain a number of monthly meeting schools that would carry on as such until the public school system absorbed them.

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[5] Klain 51.
[6] Klain 58.
[7] Klain 59
[8] Klain 60.

A sample of one such school is from the Eastern Quarter in 1834. The quarter had been striving to establish a school since 1801, but could not finance its construction or maintenance until 1834. Happily, the school was finally built and named the Eastern Quarter School, later renamed Belvidere. The school was constructed to function as a *select school*, but later extended attendance to both Quakers and non-Quakers in order to better serve the community and finance its continuity. The school ran with only minor issues, some which required readjusting tuition rates and the occasional monthly closing for health and safety reasons. The caveat to this is that during the Civil War the Eastern Quarter School, as with most North Carolina schools, closed for a few months in both 1861 and 1863,[9] and the school relied heavily on aid given from the Baltimore Association of Friends to maintain viability. It was not until 1875 that the public school system started to "supply the educational needs of the community," as the needs had "heretofore been supplied . . . by private agencies."[10] In comparison, Quaker schools "enjoyed a six- to a nine-month term, [while] the public school offered instruction . . . only four months."[11] Times change, however, and public schools—also known as free schools—began to pull nearly twenty percent of the students from the Eastern Quarter School. This migration from private to public schools indicated a statewide trend of growth in public education.

From as early as 1882 until roughly 1914 many monthly meeting schools were merged with the public school system. In some cases, this occurred by wholesale of private property to the public of North Carolina, and in others it was just a slow and simple progression of shared payment and cost, eventually leading to "the public school [taking] the place of the private."[12]

[9] Klain 130.
[10] Klain 133.
[11] Klain.
[12] Klain 146.

References

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