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Like the Puritan settlers of New England, the Quakers who founded Pennsylvania were intent upon establishing a pious society dedicated to plain living and high thinking. However, economic success soon eroded the Quakers' commitment to simplicity and spirituality. A religious revival in the mid-eighteenth century temporarily restored the traditional ethics of the Society of Friends (Quakers), but at the cost of diminished public influence for their beliefs.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE SIMPLE LIFE

From their founding in the mid-seventeenth century, Quakers were known and sometimes persecuted for their egalitarian, pacifist beliefs. Despite their theological differences, the Quakers shared the Calvinist and Puritan emphasis on the virtues of thrift, sobriety, and hard work. The Friends chose the path of simple living to keep themselves free of greed, and to be able to devote themselves to spiritual pursuits and social service rather than material gain.

George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, recognized that some Quakers would grow wealthy, but cautioned that when "Riches do increase, take heed of setting your Hearts upon them, lest they become a Curse and a Plague to you."¹ He urged affluent Quakers to sell their unnecessary possessions and distribute the proceeds to the poor. Quakers did not expect everyone to have the same income, but believed that the gap between rich and poor should be narrowed.

WILLIAM PENN AND HIS COLONY

As persecution of nonconformist sects intensified in late seventeenth-century England, many Quakers emigrated to North America, especially to the colony created by William Penn. The son of an admiral and friend of the king, Penn enjoyed the upbringing of an affluent gentleman, but he experienced an abrupt religious conversion in 1667 at the age of 22, and thereafter he became one of the most influential proponents of the Society of Friends, going to jail several times for his beliefs.

Like other early Quakers, Penn advocated the simple life, but not monastic self-denial. It was important to carry the faith into everyday life, in part to influence the broader society. Wealth alone was not evil, but luxury and avarice were: "Riches serve wise men, but command fools."²

Upon founding Philadelphia in 1682, Penn and the other religious authorities in Pennsylvania and West Jersey insisted on strict moral codes of behavior. Wage and price controls were enacted, as were sumptuary laws to prevent needless display of luxury. The Quakers were as strict as the Puritans in prescribing codes of moral behavior.

DOING GOOD OR DOING WELL?

In retrospect it is remarkable how rapidly the Quaker commitment to pious simplicity faded away. Migration of other settlers into Pennsylvania soon made Quakers a minority, undermining the political, social and religious orientation of the original settlement. But even among the Friends themselves, who enjoyed the first access to the colony's fertile lands and promising trade, prosperity often overwhelmed the simple life. Complaints about the extravagant ways of affluent young Quakers in Philadelphia began almost immediately, and only grew in intensity over the years.

Penn himself was shocked, as early as 1697, by the lack of modesty and virtue he saw in Philadelphia. Yet Penn's own life reflected the ambiguity of the Quaker commitment to simplicity. Despite his religious conversion, he never lost his personal taste for aristocratic living, and maintained a magnificent country estate overlooking the Delaware River, with numerous servants and slaves. He told his critics that a certain amount of material display was needed to sustain the power and prestige of his office, as head of the colony. Temperance and self-restraint were virtues, Penn felt, in relation to one's social standing. In a similar spirit, one of the wealthy Quakers of the day requested imported furniture from a London merchant, specifying that it should be "*of the best Sort but Plain.*"³

JOHN WOOLMAN AND THE "GREAT AWAKENING"

The "Great Awakening," the religious revival that swept through many of the colonies in the middle of the eighteenth century, had its counterpart among the Quakers of Pennsylvania. Beginning in the 1740's and continuing for well over a generation, a reformation occurred among Friends. The reformers criticized the growing worldliness of affluent Quakers and called for a return to the traditional ethic of simple living.

It was in this period that Quakers lost control of the political life of Pennsylvania. With the outbreak of the French and Indian War in 1754, settlements in western Pennsylvania came under attack. While some Quakers supported defensive military action, seven pacifist Friends resigned from the Pennsylvania Assembly over the issue in 1755. They were replaced by supporters of Benjamin Franklin's policy of vigorous military defense. This ended Quaker control of the Assembly.

The loss of political power allowed the Friends, now no more than a quarter of the population of the colony they had founded, to focus on internal renewal of their own faith and relationships. Strict moral codes were again enforced; Friends were expelled for marrying non-Quakers, violating standards of simple living, or supporting military action.

The most prominent leader of the Quaker reformation was John Woolman (1720-1772). He became a successful merchant in the 1740s, yet at the same time began to speak out about the effects of commercial success on religious and family life. He was also an early crusader against slavery, helping to persuade the Philadelphia meeting in 1758 to disown those who continued to buy slaves.

After the Assembly crisis in 1755, when it was clear that Penn's "holy experiment" of a Quaker-controlled colony had failed, Woolman and others worried about what would become of their faith and social ethics. Woolman increasingly devoted himself to writing and speaking about the evils of wealth and the virtues of simplicity. Unable to curtail his growing business, he left it altogether, and instituted a regimen of relentless simplification. His plain appearance, dressed in undyed cloth, startled even Quakers.

Simplicity for Woolman had economic as well as spiritual benefits. Rejecting the argument that lowered consumption would lead to unemployment, he replied that in a simpler society more workers would have the satisfaction of producing staples rather than baubles, and that work days could be reduced, making vocations a source of pride rather than drudgery.

The Quaker ethic, reinvigorated by Woolman and other reformers of his day, survived largely intact through the turbulent revolutionary years and beyond. Yet it survived at the price of withdrawal from social leadership and influence. The Quakers self-consciously embraced their new minority status as a "quiet and peculiar" people set apart from society. Even within that minority, commitment to the simple life proved hard to maintain. The forces opposing pious simplicity included not only personal tastes for luxury, but also traditional hierarchical social values, as in the case of Penn, and the belief in diligent pursuit of one's calling, in a fast-growing economy where many were sure to prosper.

Notes

1. L.V. Hopkin, A Day-Book of Counsel and Comfort, from the Epistles of George Fox (London, 1937), 109, 90-91; cited by Shi, 29.
2. William Penn, "No Cross, No Crown," in Society of Friends, Selected Works of William Penn, 3 vols. (London, 1825), 1: 333; cited by Shi, 31.
3. Isaac Norris to Joseph Pike, 25 February 1707, in Edward Armstrong, ed., "Correspondence between William Penn and James Logan," Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania 10 (1872); Tolles, Quakers and Atlantic Culture (New York, 1960), 76-77, 79, 86-88; cited by Shi, 36.