
Franklin and Friends: Benjamin Franklin's Ties to Quakers and Quakerism

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In 1786 the *Journal de Paris* published a series of letters debating whether Benjamin Franklin was a member of the Society of Friends. This controversy was no mere speculative exercise, but was a consequence of Franklin's public image while serving as commissioner to France during the American Revolution. Because the French people, influenced by the opinions of Voltaire and Montesquieu, had such high regard for the simple, moral tenets of the Quaker religion, Franklin presented himself in public as a "Quaker philosopher" by adopting "a grave demeanor and Quaker garb."¹ The argument over Franklin's affiliation with Quakers, hardly an incident limited to French soil, had intrigued Pennsylvanians for decades. It epitomizes, albeit in exaggerated form, some of the confusion that still surrounds historical accounts of Franklin's connection with Quakers and Quakerism.

Reminiscent of the Parisian correspondents of 1786, historians have generally split into two opposing camps over the issue of Franklin's relationship with members of the Society of Friends. Though recent interpretations no longer depict Franklin as a practicing Quaker, some historians, by emphasizing Franklin's close relationships with members of that sect, portray him as a quasi-Quaker. Other scholars, focusing instead on the differences between Franklin and the Friends, see him as an anti-Quaker. These contradictory visions of Franklin's ties to Quakers and Quakerism unfortunately conceal many of the more subtle complexities of this relationship.

An exemplar of the quasi-Quaker interpretation of Franklin's connections with Friends is Frederick Tolles' study of Franklin's business mentors. Under the tutelage of the Quaker merchants of Philadelphia, Tolles argues, Franklin adopted their economic philosophy with its emphasis on the virtues of frugality and industry, and in the process became the torchbearer of Quaker principles of liberal capitalism and the prototype of the modern American businessman. Evident in Tolles' work, and integral to the quasi-Quaker interpretative model, is an emphasis on the congruity of Quaker ideas, values, and practices with those of Franklin.² The significance of this approach, one that focuses on points of agreement rather than on differences, is demonstrated by its enduring popularity among scholars and by the fact that much of the literature dealing with Franklin and Quakers is written from this perspective.



*Peint par C. N. Cochin Chevalier de l'Ordre du Roi, en 1777 et Gravé par J. B. de S^t. Aubin Graveur de la Bibliothèque du Roi.
 Se vend à Paris chez C. N. Cochin au Salon de la Louvre, à côté des 2^{es} Salles, aux des Mathurins.*

Portrait of Benjamin Franklin painted in France by Augustus de Saint-Aubin in 1777

Other scholars have stripped Franklin of his Quaker garb either to expose conflict or to draw distinctions between Franklin's ideas and actions and those of Quakers, and in the process have fashioned an image of Franklin as an anti-Quaker. William Hanna, for instance, challenges the interpretation that Franklin's political activities in pre-revolutionary Pennsylvania are best understood in light of the liberal democratic principles he shared with members of the Quaker-led Assembly. Basing his study on an examination of Franklin's behavior rather than his writings, Hanna concludes that Franklin's relationships with Quakers were motivated by self-interest and lasted only until Franklin's concerns could be better served by allying himself with others.³ While Hanna's account represents a skeptical interpretation of Franklin's associations with Quakers, it nevertheless typifies the many works that fall into the anti-Quaker camp because it focuses on the elements of discord rather than on the areas of agreement.

From a broader perspective, polarized views of Franklin and Quakers also leave us with opposing images of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. On the one hand, the quasi-Quaker interpretation leaves the impression that Pennsylvania society was based largely on consensus, while the anti-Quaker model emphasizes conflict. By taking into account both the diversity of opinions and actions that existed within the ranks of the Society of Friends, as well as the complex nature of Franklin's connections with members of that sect, this study attempts to synthesize these two views and to present a more complex, but more accurate, representation of life in colonial Pennsylvania.⁴

Franklin, of course, recognized this complexity; therefore, neither the image of quasi-Quaker nor that of anti-Quaker fully portrays his associations with members of the Society of Friends from his own perspective. His writings reveal, instead, that he was acutely aware that the Quaker name applied to a variety of people, some of whom he identified with and others of whom he did not. Franklin's attitudes toward Quakers took many forms during his lifetime and were largely determined by his Enlightenment-etched beliefs concerning the role of religion in society. Throughout his life Franklin promoted a civic religion that encompassed the characteristics of tolerance, flexibility, practicality, and accommodation. It is not surprising that Franklin's closest Quaker friends were men whose beliefs and activities were also grounded in the secular Enlightenment tradition.

AN ENLIGHTENMENT VIEW OF RELIGION

While Franklin was willing, for political purposes, to pass himself off to the Parisians as a Quaker, that was an extraordinary circumstance. Under normal conditions Franklin often chose to disassociate himself not only from the formal institutions and dogmas of Quakerism, but also from other religious denominations as well. Franklin had been "religiously educated as a Presbyterian" and his father had hopes of his becoming a minister. He recalled, however, that at a very

young age he became "a real Doubter in many Points of our Religious Doctrine" and stopped attending the "Public Assemblies of the Sect, Sunday being my Studying-Day."⁵ While much of Franklin's criticism of religion was directed against the Presbyterians, he was often critical of organized religion in general and no other denomination ever won his heart to its cause.⁶ In fact, even though he purchased a pew at the Anglican Church in Philadelphia and encouraged his daughter to attend the services, Franklin never became a churchgoer. His religious concerns were instead related mainly to ethical questions of a secular nature.

Although he briefly flirted with atheism in his youth, Franklin's religious tendencies were essentially deistic in principle, corresponding with the beliefs of other eighteenth-century intellectuals. Summarizing his views late in life, Franklin wrote

I never was without some religious Principles; I never doubted, for instance, the Existence of the Deity, that he made the World, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable Service of God was the doing Good to Man; that our Souls are immortal; and that all Crime will be punished and Virtue rewarded either here or hereafter.⁷

Rejecting the literal interpretation of the Bible, the divinity of Christ, and the possibility of revealed religion, Franklin had no need for religious dogma in his own life and followed instead the tenets of Enlightenment rationality.

While Franklin, like many intellectuals, wanted to purge religion of what Thomas Schlereth calls its "historic idiosyncrasies and provincial incrustations," he recognized that organized religion could be useful in deterring moral chaos and contributing to the maintenance of social order.⁸ Despite the fact that he personally felt no need for a conversion experience, Franklin approved of the growing religious spirit that spread through Philadelphia as a result of George Whitefield's visit in 1739.⁹ Reiterating this point in a 1757 letter to an unknown recipient, Franklin wrote

But think how great a proportion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperience'd and inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it becomes *habitual*. . . . If men are so wicked as we now see them *with religion*, what would they be *if without it*?

From Franklin's perspective the purpose of religion was to inculcate certain societal values that would result in people doing "really good works, works of kindness, charity, mercy, and publick spirit," and had little to do with the achievement of personal piety.¹¹ In a letter to his parents in 1738, Franklin

remarked that

vital religion has always suffer'd, when Orthodoxy is more regarded than Virtue. And the Scripture assures me, that at the last Day, we shall not be examin'd [for] what we *thought*, but what we *did*; and our Recommendation will not be that we said *Lord, Lord*, but that we did GOOD to our Fellow Creatures.¹²

Franklin thus envisioned a civic religion where citizens would compromise the religious principles of their individual denominations and sects for the purpose of maintaining social harmony within the community at large. Organized religion, therefore, should remain practical and flexible, and its tenets judged according to those standards. From Franklin's viewpoint, no religious belief or practice was sacrosanct. If it did not serve society well, then it should be discarded for something new.¹³

Franklin's tendency to see the world through the eyes of the Enlightenment distinguished him from many of the more spiritual Quakers, who practiced the quietist methods of waiting for the inner light. According to Franklin, he visited a Quaker meeting once, but found the silence so oppressive that he fell asleep.¹⁴ Whether or not this story is literally true, it serves as a reminder that while several historians have often pointed out a certain similarity between Quaker thought and Franklin's ideas, there is no evidence that Franklin's knowledge of Quakerism was based on formal instruction. Instead, it seems to have been derived primarily from his observations of the public activities of Quakers and through his relationships with individual Friends. And, as Franklin's papers reveal, those Quakers with whom he had the closest ties tended to be prosperous, cosmopolitan, and well-educated men who practiced their religion in a more practical rather than pious fashion. As a matter of fact, their world-view was quite similar to Franklin's.¹⁵

FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATES

During his early years in Philadelphia as an aspiring entrepreneur, many of Franklin's associations with Quakers were with members of the mercantile community. While Franklin's writings reveal little about the specifics of these relationships, he does describe one of his earliest and most important friendships. At age eighteen Franklin, during his trip to England, met Quaker merchant Thomas Denham, a fellow Philadelphian. Denham, who assumed the role of Franklin's fatherly advisor during the course of the trip, became his business mentor as well when they returned to Philadelphia two years later, in 1726. Although their relationship was shortened because of Denham's death in 1728, Franklin later remembered this fatherly Friend with warmth and affection, praising him for his attributes of goodness and honesty.¹⁶ Appropriately, no

mention is made of his piety, a trait for which Franklin never expressed much admiration.

Franklin's assessment of his relationship with Denham epitomizes many of his other contacts with Quakers during the following two decades. Some of these relationships came about when, in 1728 he formed most of his "ingenious Acquaintance[s] into a Club for mutual Improvement, which we call'd the Junto."¹⁷ One of the Junto's earliest members was Hugh Roberts, a Quaker merchant, who seems to have exemplified the image of the "good Quaker," as well as being the sort of Friend with whom Franklin had a great deal in common. These two men shared many experiences during their lifetimes, including their participation in intellectual and humanitarian pursuits—the Junto, the Library Company, the Union Fire Company, and the Pennsylvania Hospital. Extending their shared experiences to the political arena, Franklin and Roberts were both elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1751. Coincidentally, the two men also shared the same birth year, and they remained very close friends until Roberts' death in 1786.¹⁸

Another noted member of the Junto was Joseph Breintnall, a Quaker merchant who also served as secretary of the Library Company from 1731 to 1746. Franklin described Breintnall as

good-natur'd, friendly . . . a great lover of Poetry, reading all he could meet with, and writing some that was tolerable; very ingenious in many little Nicknackeries, and of sensible Conversation.¹⁹

Breintnall was an important figure in Franklin's life because, according to historian Carl Bridenbaugh, it was Breintnall who, sometime after 1740, awakened Franklin's curiosity in natural philosophy.²⁰ And it was through his entry into the scientific community that Franklin would experience some of his closest and most enduring friendships with Quakers such as John Bartram and Peter Collinson.

While Bartram and Collinson both shared Franklin's interest in natural history and were close friends, Bartram, unlike Collinson, differed somewhat from many of the other Quakers with whom Franklin associated. Living in the countryside, Bartram, a farmer and self-taught botanist, seems to have been one of the few rural Quakers whom Franklin knew personally. Despite his rustic surroundings, Bartram, through his association with Franklin and with other members of the Library Company, began to take an active part in the intellectual life of Philadelphia during the 1740s. Franklin visited and corresponded with Bartram frequently and together they formed, along with Collinson, a sort of clearinghouse through which members of the scientific community communicated.²¹

A wealthy textile merchant from London, Collinson was a very prominent Friend who shared many of Franklin's intellectual and humanitarian concerns. For instance, Collinson served as agent and benefactor to the Library Company



"The Prospect of Philadelphia," 1735, by G. Wood. This is one of the earliest known views of Philadelphia. Note the Quaker Meetinghouse at No. 2.

of Philadelphia for over thirty years, and according to Franklin, its success "was greatly owing to his kind Countenance and good Advice."²² But Collinson's friendship differed from many of Franklin's associations with Quakers during the 1730s and 1740s in one significant way. Theretofore Franklin's mentors had been active primarily in the realms of business and science. Franklin's friendship with Collinson, however, included a political dimension that would foreshadow many of Franklin's other political alliances with Quakers, including those with James Logan and Isaac Norris, Jr. Collinson was able to use his powerful political connections to help further Franklin's political career, especially when Franklin was seeking the office of Deputy Colonial Postmaster in 1753.²³ While it often served Franklin well with regard to political advancement, their friendship was also based on sincere warmth and affection—to the point, in fact, that the salutation in one of Collinson's letters to Franklin was penned to "the Man I Love."²⁴

Franklin's involvement in political affairs brought him into contact with some of Pennsylvania's leading public figures. Two of these men, James Logan and Isaac Norris, Jr., both considered "Quaker grandees" by historian Frederick Tolles, played important roles as Franklin's political mentors.²⁵ Franklin recounts in his journal how, while serving as clerk of the Assembly beginning in 1736, he schemed to gain Norris's favor by asking to borrow one of his books.²⁶ Franklin's relationship with Logan began around 1747 when they joined forces in an

attempt to develop and to carry out policies concerning colonial defense. While Logan and Norris were wealthier and politically more powerful than many of Franklin's Quaker associates (perhaps with the exception of Collinson), they nevertheless shared the more secular version of Quakerism that Franklin found so compatible with his own world view. As members of the Pennsylvania Assembly, both men often relegated certain Quaker principles, particularly the pacifist stance commonly referred to as the peace testimony, to a secondary position.²⁷ They could thus focus their efforts on colonial defense issues, the maintenance of Quaker dominance in the Pennsylvania Assembly, and the struggle for increased legislative autonomy over colonial affairs. Franklin's interests often converged with those of the worldly Quakers on such issues.²⁸

Although these short sketches of Franklin's Quaker associates represent only a few of the close relationships Franklin had with Quakers throughout his life, they demonstrate the depth as well as the complexity of many of his ties with members of that sect, and would at first glance seem to support the image of Franklin as a quasi-Quaker. Yet it is important to remember that the Quakers with whom Franklin was closely associated were of a particular type. Cosmopolitan in outlook, these men shared many of Franklin's interests and beliefs. Because these men, unlike their more orthodox brethren, focused more on the design of nature and the duties of secular society than on the dimension of the spirit, Franklin had little cause to identify his cohorts as religious sectarians. Instead, he related to them in Enlightenment terms as men who were "doers of good" and "promoters of useful knowledge."²⁹

Nevertheless, several of the men mentioned above did at times serve in leadership positions within the Quaker community. Hugh Roberts, James Logan, and Isaac Norris were each appointed to a number of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting committees during their lifetimes, with Roberts being the most active and Norris hardly participating at all.³⁰ Neither Logan nor Norris, however, were influential members of the Society of Friends in religious affairs; they are best remembered for their political activities. Not considered a good Quaker by many because of his belief in defensive war, Logan played a major role in colonial politics before his death in 1751 as William Penn's secretary and chief representative in Pennsylvania. Norris was also active politically, particularly as a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly where he served as Speaker from 1750 to 1764.³¹

Though there is no evidence that Franklin was friends with any Quaker minister or with rural reformers like John Woolman and John Churchman, he was acquainted with several strict Quakers who lived in Philadelphia, including Anthony Benezet and James and Israel Pemberton. Each of these three men began their careers as merchants, but eventually branched out into a variety of political and philanthropic activities. Their connections to Franklin were equally as diverse. Little is known about the exact nature of the relationship between Franklin and Benezet beyond the fact that Benezet, among others, helped to

convert Franklin to the abolitionist cause sometime before 1769.³² Franklin and the Pemberton brothers crossed paths much more frequently, however, as they shared an interest in the Pennsylvania Hospital and were also seriously involved in colonial politics.³³

Despite these common interests, Franklin's associations with the Pembertons, as well as with Benezet, appear qualitatively different from his relationships with some of the more worldly Quakers. Their letters do not convey the same level of warmth and friendship that is evident in his correspondence with Collinson, for instance. The reason for this discrepancy has to do with the fact that Benezet and the Pemberton brothers were strict Quakers, which often put them at odds with Franklin's plans for colonial defense. In particular, Franklin's political interaction with Israel Pemberton was often tense and riddled with suspicion.³⁴ Franklin drew a firm line on the pacifist issue because he believed that Quakers with a "tender conscience," particularly those in positions of authority, hindered policies that were intended for the common good.

While Franklin's relationship with the more worldly Quakers provides at least qualified support for the image of him as a quasi-Quaker, the characterization of Franklin as an anti-Quaker, then, is given credence as a result of the stance he took toward the more orthodox Friends. Beginning in 1747, Franklin often directed his ire against Quaker members of the Pennsylvania Assembly for their unwillingness to compromise their orthodox religious beliefs in order to achieve what he considered a greater good—the defense of the colony. While Franklin's views on Quaker pacifism would certainly seem to support the anti-Quaker interpretative model, upon closer scrutiny it is evident that this judgment is also too simplistic. A more extensive examination of Franklin's political activities reveals that his criticisms had to do with specific issues and were not directed against Quakerism in general.

PENNSYLVANIA POLITICS AND QUAKER PACIFISM

Franklin's political career was, in large part, launched as a result of his activities on behalf of colonial military preparedness; this was the very issue that would eventually force Quaker politicians to withdraw from Pennsylvania politics. In 1747 Franklin published a pamphlet, entitled *Plain Truth*, castigating the provincial government for its failure to provide adequate military protection for its citizens, and encouraging the "middling People" to take the matter of defense into their own hands.³⁵ Military preparedness had become a controversial issue as a result of England's war with France and Spain. Philadelphians feared an attack on their city by French privateers and since, as Franklin pointed out, "the laboured and long-continued Endeavors of our Governor Thomas to prevail with our Quaker Assembly to pass a Militia Law, and make other Provisions for the Security of the Province had failed," he felt compelled to act.³⁶

Writing as a political outsider, Franklin attempted in *Plain Truth* to rally

the populace behind a policy of colonial defense by pointing a finger at those groups that he believed were to blame for what had become a very precarious situation. While Franklin directed general criticisms at the powerful Quaker Assembly and the "Great and rich Men, Merchants and others" for their unwillingness to work together for the protection of "our Lives, Our Families and little Fortunes," he made more specific accusations against those Friends who were bound by the Quaker principle of pacifism not "to do any thing for our Defence." In Franklin's view their failure to uphold their end of the civil contract, exchanging protection for obedience, required that they should "quit the Helm to freer Hands during the present Tempest." While Franklin was aware that the Quakers were acting according to conscience, he showed little sympathy for what he called their "*mistaken Principles of Religion*."³⁷

Later in 1747 Franklin published a second pamphlet, known as the "Form of Association," blaming the Quakers for the Assembly's failure to support colonial defense measures. A voluntary militia had become necessary, argued Franklin, because the government "has always, from religious Considerations, refused to use the common Means for the Defense of the Country against an Enemy."³⁸ Due in large part to Franklin's urgent warnings, citizens proceeded to provide their own protection while members of the provincial government sat on their hands.

As a result of his defense-related activities, Franklin achieved province-wide recognition and prestige. Elected to the Philadelphia Common Council in 1748 and to the Pennsylvania Assembly three years later, he continued to work on behalf of military preparedness. Now operating as a political insider and increasingly active as an ally in the Quaker Party's struggles against the Proprietor, Franklin's criticism of strict Quakers was expressed publicly on only one other occasion during the pre-revolutionary era. While attending the Albany Congress in 1754, Franklin drafted the Albany Plan of Union, in which he presented a scheme for an inter-colonial military alliance that would have fostered a united effort during the French and Indian War. Retaining a critical posture toward the Quakers for their religious principles, Franklin considered a united colonial effort a possible solution to the defense problem because

certain colonies have ... *particular whims and prejudices* against warlike measures in general, as Pennsylvania, where the Quakers predominate; such colonies would have more weight in a partial union, and be better able to oppose and obstruct the measures necessary for the general good, than where they are swallowed up in the general union.³⁹

In Franklin's opinion, then, the influence of pacifist Quakers would be counter-acted in a general union. But when Franklin's plan failed to gain widespread support among the colonial representatives to the Albany Congress, Franklin

turned his efforts to neutralize the dominance of strict Quakers in Pennsylvania politics to private and indirect means.

While differences of opinion had long existed among Quaker members of the Pennsylvania Assembly concerning the issue of defensive war, the pacifist faction was able to maintain political dominance until 1756. At that point the crisis presented by the French and Indian War became so great that a number of strict Quakers resigned from their seats in the Assembly. Franklin expressed his approval, relating the news of the development to Peter Collinson in June 1756:

All the *Stifftrumps except One*, that could be suspected of opposing the Service from religious Motives, have voluntarily quitted the Assembly; and 'tis proposed to chuse Churchmen in their Places. These Changes . . . promise us some fair Weather, which I have long sigh'd for.⁴⁰

The events of 1756 had reinforced Franklin's argument that any Quaker who would not yield his religious principles in order to perform his political responsibilities had no place in government.

Before the American Revolution, Franklin's criticism of Quaker pacifism had been directed toward Quaker politicians. In 1777, however, Franklin changed his focus of censure to the Quaker community at large. This shift was a result of the success of reform-minded Quakers in persuading their political brethren to withdraw from public office. Consequently, when Franklin criticized the Quakers, a "powerful body in Pennsylvania," for giving the war effort "every opposition their art, abilities and influence could suggest," he directed his anger toward the sect as a whole. Perturbed at their lack of cooperation in the patriotic cause, Franklin linked them with other traitors who, because of their "contrariety of opinion, tory principles, personal animosities, [or] fear of so dreadful and dubious an undertaking, joined with the artful promises and threats of the enemy." This association rendered them "open or concealed opposers, or timid neutrals, or lukewarm friends to the proposed revolution."⁴¹ Once again members of the Society of Friends were denounced for failing to compromise their religious principles for the common good.

ACCOMMODATING PACIFISM

Throughout his political career, while critical at times of Quaker pacifism, Franklin always left the door open to conciliation. In 1747 he printed some verses in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* complimenting both the Quakers and the standard account of their theology, Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. He did this hoping to "win over moderate Quakers who, like James Logan, appreciated the obligations of power."⁴² Franklin also took a conciliatory line in his "Form of Association" when he expressed his hope that

this whole Affair will be conducted with *good Order* and *Sobriety*, and that no *ill-natured* Reflections, no *Injuries* or *Insults* will be offered

our *peaceable Friends, Neighbours and Fellow-subjects*, who, from their *religious Scruples*, cannot allow themselves to join us.⁴³

Moreover, while Franklin's plan to organize a voluntary militia through extralegal means appears to have been an unfriendly act against the colonial government, in actuality it was also an effort at accommodation. He offered all sides something by giving the Assembly a way out of a potentially embarrassing and politically damaging situation. Strict Quakers would gain freedom of conscience without penalty, while the colony would be provided with an effective system of defense.

Franklin's conciliatory moves gained support from certain moderate Quakers. James Logan, a long time advocate of defensive war, had come to Philadelphia in 1699 as William Penn's secretary and had thereafter become one of Pennsylvania's leading political figures. Logan had presented his pro-defense views to the Quaker Yearly Meeting in 1741. Not surprisingly, they met with no success. Writing to Franklin in December 1747, Logan said that

Ever since I have had the power of thinking, I have clearly seen that government without arms is an inconsistency. Our Friends spare me no pains to get and accumulate estates, and yet are against defending them, though these very estates are in a great measure the sole cause of their being invaded. . . .⁴⁴

Logan further supported Franklin's plans to establish a lottery to finance the construction of a battery and to purchase guns and cannons for its defense. Praising Franklin's activities in a letter to Peter Collinson, Logan wrote that "what I principally esteem him for, is . . . his real Service to the Country in being Instrumental in Saving it by his contriving the plan [of] his 2 Lotteries."⁴⁵

Logan was a Quaker who shared Franklin's belief in the responsibility of government to defend the life and property of its citizens. As a result of Logan and Franklin's shared interests and concerns, a close and friendly relationship developed between them as Franklin increasingly aligned himself with Quaker members of the Assembly.

Beginning in 1755 Franklin, as a member of the anti-proprietary faction, became a vocal supporter of a strong defense posture. He discussed this matter and its relationship to Quakers in a letter to Peter Collinson:

If the End was, simply, to get the Country defended by Grants of Money, the Quakers have now shown that they can give and dispose of Money for that purpose as freely as any People. . . . I know the Quakers now think it their Duty, when chosen, to consider themselves as Representatives of the *Whole People*, and not of their Sect only; they consider the public Money as raised from and belonging to the *whole Publick*, and not to their Sect only. . . . To me, it seems that if Quakerism (as to the Matter of Defense) be excluded from the House,

there is no Necessity to exclude Quakers, who in other respects make good and useful Members.⁴⁶

Before 1755, Quaker disagreement over defense had been effectively contained, but as evidenced by this statement, some Quaker politicians (though not as many as Franklin implies) had rejected the peace testimony and were quite willing to support defensive war measures. Certain strict Quakers claimed that Franklin influenced this change. Though this is only partially true, one could expect that Franklin would approve of individual Quakers who modified their principles for the benefit of the whole community, and would remain highly critical of strict Quakers whose deep-felt religious convictions prevented them from following suit.⁴⁷

Franklin's support of particular Quaker policies took on a public dimension in 1757 when he travelled to England to serve as Pennsylvania's colonial agent. Though the purpose of Franklin's trip was to reach an agreement with the Proprietor concerning the taxation of colonial lands, much of his time was spent defending the Indian and military policies that had been initiated by Pennsylvania's non-pacifist Quaker leaders to members of both the British government and the larger British public. Beginning the same year, Franklin published a series of articles under his son's name that explained the Pennsylvania political conflict from the perspective of the Quaker politicians. These essays were an attempt to present their position on such topics as Indian scalping, money for defense, and pacifism among members of the Assembly in a favorable light.⁴⁸

Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania



"Franklin and the Quakers," 1764, by an unknown artist

It might seem at this point that while being neither an extreme quasi-Quaker nor an anti-Quaker, Franklin, nevertheless, disliked Quakerism. But Franklin's writings reveal no such simple view. Although Franklin had no personal sympathy for pacifist Quakers, his practical style of politics led him to accommodate their beliefs in many of the plans and pieces of legislation he drafted over the years. For instance, both his voluntary militia plan of 1747 and his 1755 militia bill protected Quaker rights with regard to their freedom of conscience.

Franklin's works were also often sensitive to the needs of the pacifist faction of the Quaker Assembly. For instance, since Franklin's 1747 plan to organize a voluntary militia bypassed the political system completely, it alleviated some of the public pressure that had been directed toward the Quaker government. Franklin also drafted his 1755 militia bill to counteract the charge that a Quaker-led Assembly could not govern the colony during a time of military crisis. It became law in late November with only four strict Quakers dissenting. In garnering public support for the Militia Act, Franklin praised the Quaker politicians for their lenient military policies by saying that even though Quakers were exempted by law from bearing arms, their political leaders

might indeed have made the Law compulsory on all others. But it seems they thought it more equitable and generous to leave to all as much Liberty as they enjoy themselves, and not lay even a seeming Hardship on others, which they themselves declined to bear.⁴⁹

Franklin's primary concern was to reconcile an angry populace with the Quaker members of the Assembly. Striking a conciliatory note, Franklin answered a hypothetical question concerning the role of Quakers in future governments by saying

O my Friends, let us on this Occasion cast from us all these little Party Views, and consider ourselves as Englishmen and Pennsylvanians. Let us think only of the Service of our King, the Honour and Safety of our Country, and Vengeance on its Murdering Enemies. If good be done, what imports it by whom 'tis done?⁵⁰

Although Franklin's attempts at accommodation failed to win the full support of pacifist Quakers or to allay all the fears of the general public, he continued to seek reconciliation among the contending elements of Pennsylvanian society.

As late as 1775 Franklin wrote two documents that demonstrated his continued concern for colonial cooperation and expressed his persistent dissatisfaction with those who acted upon pacifist principles contrary to the public will. Although the first document was written not to a Quaker but, instead, to a Moravian, it is directly related to the subject at hand. Nathaniel Seidel had written Franklin in 1775 expressing fear that the Continental Congress would initiate reprisals against members of his sect for refusing to bear arms. While

assuring Seidel that the Congress would not countenance such activities, Franklin implied that others might not be as generous. Franklin offered, therefore, in his own practical style, his opinion that perhaps the Moravians could demonstrate their loyalty to the war effort by having some of their young men who did not hold it unlawful to bear arms in a defensive war

learn the military Discipline among their Neighbours, as this might conciliate those who at present express some Resentment. . . . But a Declaration of your Society, that tho' they cannot in conscience compell their young Men to learn the Use of Arms, yet they do not restrain such as are so disposed, will operate in the Minds of People very greatly in your Favour.⁵¹

According to Franklin, it was better to compromise one's belief than to cause conflict with one's neighbors.

Franklin reiterated this theme in another document that was addressed particularly to Quakers. Drafted sometime before September 29, 1775, his "Proposals for Conscientious Objectors" again invokes a spirit of reconciliation on the part of sectarians. By signing the document Quakers would, first of all, declare their loyalty to the patriot cause and agree to certain conditions that would prove their sincerity. For instance, the proposal requested that in case of an alarm Quakers not leave the city before it was deemed necessary by the general public. The Quakers were also required to sign a statement, promising not to

carry off our Families and Effects while others are generously employ'd in its Defence; but . . . [to] abide therein and share the Fate of our Fellow Citizens, range our selves with the Regiment, and take such Posts as shall be appointed us by the Colonel or Commanding Officer. . . .⁵²

Franklin also listed several services Quakers could perform that would demonstrate their allegiance. One of these duties, that of suppressing "Insurrections of Slaves or disaffected Persons during an Attack," is an odd request in light of the Quaker principle of non-violence. It would seem that Franklin still had a limited understanding of the depth of conviction among principled pacifists.

Franklin's writings in 1775, while continuing to promote a cooperative effort, differ from his earlier writings in that he directed his message to a new audience. Whereas the earlier documents had often implored non-pacifist members of Pennsylvania society to adapt their behavior to fit the needs of the Quakers, he was now encouraging the Quakers to accommodate themselves to a society dominated by non-pacifists. While Franklin has been criticized for attempting to turn "good Quakers" into "good Revolutionaries," it should be noted that his views regarding pacifists (though not pacifism) were moderate compared to those of the more radical members of the Pennsylvania Committee

of Safety who passed a resolution requiring "all able-bodied men of military age who refused to serve in the army" to be penalized by paying a tax. In the event that someone refused to pay, as many Quakers eventually did, harsher reprisals were to be implemented.⁵³

CONCLUSION: FRANKLIN AND THE COMPLEXITY OF QUAKER IDENTITY

Benjamin Franklin would have felt uncomfortable being labeled either a quasi-Quaker or an anti-Quaker, especially since he was aware that the Quaker name applied to a variety of people, some with whom he shared common interests and concerns and others with whom he did not. The Quakers were not monolithic in their thinking or in their behavior, and it is with this in mind that Franklin's connection to the Friends must be understood. Franklin had little in common with those Quakers who identified strongly with the religious tenets and practices of their religion, and often criticized them for their unwillingness to compromise their principles for the good of society as a whole. On the other hand, Franklin had many warm and affectionate friendships with members of the Society of Friends who shared his intellectual, humanitarian, political, and economic concerns.

To understand fully Franklin's associations with particular Quakers and his thoughts and activities concerning Quakerism, it is important to realize that these relationships were often shaped by his views about religion in general. Late in his life Franklin wrote that while he had respected all of America's religions, he admired those religions less that were "mix'd with other Articles which without any Tendency to inspire, promote or confirm Morality, serv'd principally to divide us and make us unfriendly to one another."⁵⁴ This statement goes a long way in explaining the animosity he often expressed towards strict Quakers regarding their peace testimony. By adhering so strongly to this principle, they fostered dissension and promoted conflict among different sectors of society. Franklin, whose vision of the world was greatly influenced by Enlightenment ideals, considered this type of behavior unacceptable.

Franklin did not find Quakerism in general to be without value; it was the apparent inflexibility and self-righteousness of particular Quakers that he repeatedly rejected. While Franklin could be extremely critical of pacifistic Quakers, he could also be found defending Quakers on other issues. In fact, as late as 1781, Franklin wrote to Samuel Cooper complaining that the new Massachusetts Constitution was unjust because it required Quakers to be taxed in order to pay a clergy. The Quakers, he approvingly explained, had found a means of promoting "Piety, Religion, and Morality" without benefit of a regular clergy.⁵⁵ When Quakers acted according to Franklin's own principles, he could be generous in his praise and support. When, on the other hand, they expressed views that were

at cross-purposes to his own, he was not so kind. In his own behavior, Franklin failed to achieve the level of tolerance he expected in others.

Notes

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1. *Journal de Paris*, November 26 and 29, 1786, cited in Alfred O. Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, North Carolina, 1967), pp. 224-225.
2. Frederick B. Tolles, "Benjamin Franklin's Business Mentors: The Philadelphia Quaker Merchants," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 4 (1947), 60-69. For other works that portray Franklin as a quasi-Quaker see Frank L. Mott and Chester E. Jorgenson, *Benjamin Franklin: Representative Selections with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes* (New York, 1936); Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (New York, 1942); Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Pennsylvania, 1682-1763* (Chapel Hill, 1948), pp. 247-250; John J. Zimmerman, "Benjamin Franklin and the Quaker Party, 1755-1756," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 17 (1960), 291-313; Carl Bridenbaugh, "Philosophy Put to Use: Voluntary Associations for Propagating the Enlightenment in Philadelphia, 1727-1774," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 101 (1977), 70-88.
3. William S. Hanna, *Benjamin Franklin and Pennsylvania Politics* (Stanford, 1964). For other works that portray Franklin as an anti-Quaker see Paul H. Douglas, "Two Eighteenth Century Philadelphians: Benjamin Franklin and John Woolman," *General Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, 54 (1952), 131-8; Paul W. Conner, *Poor Richard's Politics: Benjamin Franklin and His New American Order* (New York, 1965); William E. Juhnke, "Benjamin Franklin's View of the Negro and Slavery," *Pennsylvania History*, 53 (1968), 33-47; Jack D. Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-1783* (Philadelphia, 1984), p. 184.
4. I am not, of course, the first to suggest that the Quakers were a diverse group or that the Quakers' involvement in politics was complicated. Historians in recent decades have increasingly pointed out the tensions and ambiguities within Quakerism that have often brought its members into conflict and have facilitated numerous changes in the meaning of Quakerism itself. See, for example, Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism*; Gary B. Nash, *Quakers and Politics: Pennsylvania, 1681-1726* (Princeton, 1968); Richard Alan Ryerson, "Portrait of a Colonial Oligarchy: The Quaker Elite in the Pennsylvania Assembly, 1729-1776," in *Power and Status: Essays on Office-holding in the American Colonies*, ed. Bruce Daniels (Middletown, Conn., 1986); Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery: A Divided Spirit*, (Princeton, 1985); and Alan Tully, *William Penn's Legacy: Politics and Social Structure in Provincial Pennsylvania, 1726-1755* (Baltimore, 1977). Though more modest in scope, the present study contributes to this growing body of literature by articulating how Quakers were perceived by someone like Franklin who, although a contemporary, was also an outsider. While Franklin's experiences with Quakers are certainly not representative of all associations between Quakers and non-Quakers, it seems reasonable to assign them some degree of typicality.
5. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, et al. (New Haven, 1964), pp. 64, 145-146.
6. Melvin H. Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1975).
7. Franklin, *Autobiography*, p. 146.

8. Thomas J. Schlereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought: Its Form and Function in the Ideas of Franklin, Hume, and Voltaire, 1694-1790* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1977), p. 74.
9. Franklin, *Autobiography*, p. 175.
10. Benjamin Franklin to [?], [December 13, 1757?], *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (hereafter cited as *Papers*), ed. Leonard W. Labaree, et al. (New Haven, 1959-), VII, p. 294.
11. Paul Leicester Ford, *The Many-Sided Franklin* (Freeport, New York, 1972; originally published in 1898), p. 152.
12. Franklin to his parents, April 13, 1738, *Papers*, II, p. 204.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 202-204; Franklin, *Autobiography*, pp. 190-191.
14. Franklin, *Autobiography*, p. 76.
15. An enlightening account of some of the contrasts between these men and their more "tender" brethren can be found in Donald Brooks Kelley, "Friends and Nature in America: Toward an Eighteenth-Century Quaker Ecology," *Pennsylvania History*, 53, (1986).
16. Franklin, *Autobiography*, pp. 93, 104-107.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
18. Franklin to Hugh Roberts, July 16, 1753, *Papers*, V, p. 11, n. 3; Hugh Roberts to Franklin, May 15, 1760, *Papers*, IX, p. 114, n. 6.
19. Editor's Note, *Papers*, I, p. 114, n. 3.
20. Bridenbaugh, "Philosophy Put to Use," 79.
21. Editor's Note, *Papers*, II, p. 378, n. 10; John Bartram to Franklin, November 5, 1768, *Papers*, XV, p. 257; Ernest Earnest, *John and William Bartram: Botanists and Explorers* (Philadelphia, 1940), p. 69. As a result of his exposure to the latest writings and ideas of the day, Bartram espoused Deist principles and was disowned by the Darby Meeting in 1757. See *ibid.*, pp. 26-28, 60-67.
22. Franklin to William Strahan, December 11, 1745, *Papers*, III, p. 49, n. 8; Editor's Note, *Papers*, III, p. 115, n. 4.
23. Franklin to Peter Collinson, May 21, 1751, *Papers*, IV, pp. 134-135.
24. Collinson to Franklin, September 9, 1763, *Papers*, X, p. 339.
25. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House*, p. 106.
26. Franklin, *Autobiography*, pp. 171-172.
27. It is important to note that the Quakers changed the form and the meaning of their pacifistic principles over time. The best historical account documenting those changes, as well as demonstrating the variety of Quaker thought with regard to the peace testimony, is Hermann Wellenreuther, "The Political Dilemma of the Quakers in Pennsylvania, 1681-1748," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 94 (1970), 135-172. For a discussion of Logan's views concerning defensive war see, "James Logan on Defensive War," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 6 (1882), 402-411; and Frederick B. Tolles, *James Logan and the Culture of Provincial America* (Boston, 1957), pp. 153-158. On Norris, see Franklin, *Autobiography*, p. 292. John Bartram, like Logan, believed that Quakers should be allowed to defend themselves if attacked; see, Earnest, *John and William Bartram*, p. 61.
28. Franklin, *Autobiography*, pp. 171-172.
29. Franklin to David Barclay, February 12, 1781, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 10 Vols., ed. Albert Henry Smyth (New York, 1905-1907), VIII, p. 206; Franklin to Michael Collinson, February 8, 1770, *Papers*, XVII, pp. 65-66. For works that discuss Franklin's friendship with other Quakers see Betsy Copping Corner, "Dr. Fothergill's Friendship with Benjamin Franklin," *American Philosophical Society*, 102 (1958), 413-19.
30. I would like to thank Jean Soderlund for providing me with the following information (personal letter dated 2/2/90). According to her records, Roberts served as an official representative to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) three times, in 1750, 1774, and 1776. Logan participated in the PYM in 1722 and later served as an overseer of the press. Norris, who was not as active in the PYM, only attended the meeting once. With regard to committee work, Roberts was appointed to nine committees before 1780 and was a member of the Meeting for Sufferings in 1757. Logan served on committees in 1731 and 1734 while Norris was appointed to three commit-

- tees, including the overseers of the press in 1743. Although Thomas Denham, Joseph Breintnall, and John Bartram were not active in the PMM or the PYM, Bartram was the only one to be disciplined with disownment. See William Wade Hinshaw, *Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy*, Vol. II (Ann Arbor, 1938).
31. Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery*, pp. 37-38; Tolles, *James Logan*, pp. 154-156; Jack D. Marietta, "Conscience, the Quaker Community, and the French and Indian War," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 95 (1971), 11.
32. Editor's Note, *Papers*, XIX, pp. 112-113; Juhnke, "Benjamin Franklin's View of the Negro and Slavery," pp. 382-383. Anthony Benezet to Franklin, April 27, 1772, *Papers*, XIX, pp. 113-116; Franklin to Benezet, August 22, 1772, *Papers*, XIX, p. 269; February 10, 1773, *Papers*, XX, pp. 40-41; July 14, 1773, *Papers*, XX, p. 296.
33. *Papers*, V, pp. 283-285; XX, p. 3.
34. *Papers*, VII, pp. 173, 377; XIII, pp. 260-262; XXI, p. 531. It also seems significant that Franklin's earliest extant piece of correspondence with Benezet is dated 1772 (see Note 32 above), because by that time the first Quaker crisis with regard to their peace testimony had subsided, while the second crisis surrounding the events of the American Revolution had yet to occur.
35. Franklin, "Plain Truth," (1747), *Papers*, III, pp. 188-204.
36. *Autobiography*, p. 182.
37. Franklin, "Plain Truth," (1747), *Papers*, III, pp. 188-204.
38. Franklin, "Form of Association," (1747), *Papers*, III, p. 208.
39. Franklin, "Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union," [July, 1754?], *Papers*, V, p. 401.
40. Franklin to Peter Collinson, June 15, 1756, *Papers*, VI, p. 456.
41. Richard Henry Lee, "Franklin on the Miracle of the Revolution" [October 25, 1777?], *Papers*, XXV, p. 101.
42. Editor's Note, *Papers*, III, p. 183.
43. Franklin, "Form of Association," (1747), *Papers*, III, p. 212.
44. James Logan to Franklin, December 3, 1747, *Papers*, III, p. 219.
45. Logan to Peter Collinson, [February?] 28, 1749/50, *Papers*, III, pp. 471-472.
46. Franklin to Collinson, August 27, 1755, *Papers*, VI, pp. 170-171.
47. Franklin, "Mutiny Act," (1755), *Papers*, VI, p. 435.
48. William Franklin to the Printer of the Citizen, (1757), *Papers*, VII, pp. 255-263.
49. Franklin, "A Dialogue between X, Y, and Z," (1755), *Papers*, VI, pp. 303-304.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
51. Franklin to Nathaniel Seidel, June 2, 1775, *Papers*, XXII, pp. 57-58.
52. Franklin, "Proposals for Conscientious Objectors," [Before September 29, 1775?], *Papers*, XXII, pp. 209-210.
53. Franklin, "The Pennsylvania Committee of Safety: Report to the Pennsylvania Assembly," (1775), *Papers*, XXII, pp. 211-213.
54. Franklin, *Autobiography*, p. 146.
55. Franklin to Samuel Cooper, May 15, 1781, *Writings*, VIII, pp. 256-257.