

Truth for Authority, Not Authority for Truth: The 150th Anniversary Celebration of the Longwood Progressive Friends Meeting House

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Introduction

In 1853, fifty-eight remarkable women and men issued a call for a "General Religious Convention" to be held at the Old Kennett Meetinghouse. This call resulted in the creation of the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends whose annual meetings, held from 1853 to 1940, were a beacon to reformers throughout the United States.

The Longwood Progressive Friends Meeting House opened in 1855. Lucretia Mott, the Quaker advocate for abolition and woman's rights, William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, Sojourner Truth, a former slave turned lecturer, Susan B. Anthony, the champion of the women's suffrage movement, Unitarian clergyman Theodore Parker and others were active participants at Longwood in the 1850s and 1860s. In the 20th century, W.E.B. DuBois, founder of the NAACP, Norman Thomas, civil libertarian and Socialist, Leslie Pinckney Hill, President of Cheyney, Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties and many make the pilgrimage to Longwood. **This is historic ground.**

What was Longwood? Lucretia Mott had a favorite saying, "Truth for Authority, not Authority for Truth." People of conscience could not blindly accept what was considered right and proper merely on the authority of the government or the clergy or by popular opinion. In the 1850s, all these authorities supported, or at least acquiesced in, the sin of slavery. People of conscience had to search themselves to find what was True, and finding Truth, do their duty to God and to humankind.

Most of the founders of Longwood lived within a few miles of this spot, Barnards, Fussells, Hambletons, Mendenhalls, Pennock, Piles and others. A handful of like-minded reformers from Philadelphia joined in the call. The group included two of the organizers of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, Bartholomew Fussell of Kennett Square and Robert Purvis. Two other founders of the Anti-Slavery Society, Thomas Whitson and James Mott, were also closely associated with Longwood. Another founder was Mary Ann M'Clintock Truman, then of Philadelphia, who had been the Secretary of the First Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. The local founders had been the core of the anti-slavery movement in Chester County for the past twenty years.

The Origins of Longwood

How did this center of reform arise in the farm lands of Chester County? The roots of Longwood were deep. Virtually all of the founders were Quakers, and for more than two centuries they had stood for obeying the dictates of conscience rather than acquiesce to unjust laws. Within ten miles of this spot are ten Quaker meetinghouses: Old Kennett, Parkersville, Kennett Square, Marlborough, Unionville, Birmingham, London Grove, Centerville, West Chester and New Garden. Quakers had been dissenters for two hundred years. In the 1650s, English Quakers were willing to face popular hostility, fines and prison rather than to compromise their religious principles. At that time the mere act of meeting for worship outside the established church could land a Quaker in jail. In the 1770s and 1780s, Quakers here in Chester County again faced fines and prison by their refusal to support either side during the American Revolution.

In the eighteenth century, Quakers moved slowly but absolutely to the position that slavery was against the will of God. Quaker religious testimony, later combined with the idealism of the American Revolution, resulted in the Pennsylvania Emancipation Act of 1780. While the act didn't immediately abolish slavery, by the early 1800s, human slavery was all but extinct in Pennsylvania. Delaware, and the border is three miles from Longwood, remained a slave state as did Maryland, fifteen miles distant. In contrast, the **townships surrounding Longwood by the 1850s were ten to thirty percent African-American.** Within five miles of this place are the sites of the African Union churches at Pocopson and Kennett and the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Marlborough.

The Underground Railroad

In the struggle for the soul of America, we were on the border. When the founders of Longwood spoke of "practical righteousness" they were not speaking in abstract terms, but of the willingness of people to risk their personal freedom and property in the cause of righteousness. With the proximity of the slave states of Delaware and Maryland, and the sympathies of the Quaker and African-American population to freedom seekers from the south, Chester County was truly border country. In 1820, **John Reed** a "self emancipated" slave living in Kennett Square fought off his old

master and overseer who had come to capture him, killing both. In January 1852, **Joseph C. Miller** of West Nottingham, Chester County, was lynched in Maryland where he had gone to try to obtain the freedom of a young African-American woman who had been kidnapped from his home. Most of the Longwood founders are included in Robert Smedley's *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania*, originally published in 1883, and now republished at the urging of the Kennett Square Underground Railroad Committee. **Castner Hanway**, whose grave is in Longwood Cemetery was charged with treason for refusing to assist Federal marshals hunting fugitive slaves and spent three months in prison before being freed. **Thomas Garrett** of Wilmington, Delaware, a founder of Longwood, was heavily fined for his participation in the Underground Railroad, yet over his career aided over three thousand fugitives to freedom. Many were sent to the homes of **Diana and Isaac Mendenhall and Hannah and John Cox**, or to others closely associated with Longwood. Participation in the Underground Railroad was not a popular act and the secrecy was as much to prevent the neighbors from finding out as it was to defend against the slave-catchers from the south.

Quakers Divide

In the 1830s, the anti-slavery movement in the United States was revitalized, and nowhere more so than in Chester County. By the time this building was opened, the founders of Longwood had been organizing anti-slavery conventions and hosting abolitionist lectures for more than twenty years. In 1838, fifteen years before the organization of Longwood, the **Kennett Anti-Slavery Society** declared that anyone "who aids in the restoration of the fugitive to his master . . . is guilty of a crime against humanity and religion" and any minister of the gospel who attempted to justify slavery was to be regarded as an enemy to religion. This statement was signed by their secretary, **Chandler Darlington**, a founder of Longwood. At this time, the President of the Kennett Anti-Slavery Society was John Cox, who, with his wife Hannah, was not only a founder of Longwood but it was the Coxes who gave sold the land that the Longwood meetinghouse and for the burial ground.

These were interesting times, but not comfortable times, particularly for the Quakers. Should the Society of Friends be a people apart from the world, maintaining their anti-slavery testimony but rejecting the involvement world's people? Should the quiet of a Quaker meeting be given over to political speeches about the evils of the day? Good Quakers maintained their witness against slavery by aiding the fugitive or by refusing to consume the products of slave labor. Some Quakers even grew cotton near the London Grove Meeting House so that they would not have to wear shirts made of the cotton produced by the unjust and unpaid labor of slaves. But other Quakers felt that personal witness was not enough. Slavery should be vigorously and continually attacked. Meetinghouses should become forums for anti-slavery and temperance speakers. In the face of evil, Quakers should not keep quiet. This issue troubled the meeting houses of Chester County for a decade. In 1845, Friends at Fallowfield could not decide on whether the meetinghouse there should remain open to abolition and temperance lectures, and so built "**People's Hall**" next door, as a place open to free and open discussion on all matters. The radicals held a series of "**conferences**" at **Marlborough Meeting House** in the mid 1840s to openly discuss whether time had come to leave the Society of Friends for some more open and activist society.

The issue simmered for years, and by 1851, there were two groups claiming to represent the Hicksite Friends of Kennett Monthly Meeting. The final act came in 1852, when the conservative faction at Marlborough Meeting arranged for the arrest of a visiting radical, **Oliver Johnson**, for disturbing the quiet of their meeting by attempting to speak on first-day. Soon after, these Friends, **members of the Progressive branch of Western Quarterly Meeting** issued the Call for a General Religious Convention.

The first annual meeting in 1853 was held at Old Kennett Meeting House, the second, in 1854, when Hicksites at Kennett protested their use of the meetinghouse, at Hammorton Hall. They needed a building of their own. The cornerstone for this new building to be used for "moral, literary and scientific purposes" was laid on September 3, 1854. The new building was dedicated on May 19, 1855, and followed on the next day by the third annual session of the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends. The meeting was opened to "all who regard mankind as one Brotherhood, and who acknowledge the duty of showing their faith in God, not by assenting to the lifeless propositions of a man-made creed, but by lives of person purity and a hearty devoting to the welfare of their fellow men. Slavery, Intemperance, War, Capital Punishment, the denial of the Equal Rights of Woman, Oppression in all this forms, Ignorance, Superstition, Priestcraft and Ecclesiastical Domination--these, and all such as these, are the evils and sins, which they feel constrained to assail by every rightful and legitimate weapon; while they seek to promote every virtue . . . and to foster those . . . principles of justice, mercy and love, which alone can secure the peace, progress and happiness of all the children of God. "

They also opened the Longwood Cemetery in 1855, declaring that there be no "unchristian distinction on account of color or condition" in the assignment of lots.

What Was Longwood?

The Progressive Friends invited to membership **"all those who look to God as a Universal Father, and who regard as one Brotherhood the whole family of man."** They were **"people of faith" but they desired to "divorce Religion from *Technical Theology*."** The mark of a religious life was not adherence to this or that creedal formulation but to practical righteousness. A man was once asked whether he was a Christian. "Don't ask me," he replied, "ask my neighbors." **Longwood always had a Quaker core, but quickly attracted reformers of various religious stripes.** For many years, the presiding clerk of Longwood, was a Unitarian. Through the 19th century, Spiritualists, Shakers and Christian Scientists came to speak and participate.

Longwood was the Peaceable Kingdom where the lion and the lamb dwelt together. This did not mean that differences were forgotten, but people with of different beliefs could unite in the pursuit of common ends. If this meant on occasion that the meeting listened patiently to people with strange ideas, so be it. At times, they heard from their opponents. In 1912, the Women's Suffrage leader Anna Howard Shaw came to speak at Longwood. Any exceptionally brave or exceptionally foolish anti-suffragist woman rose to refute Shaw. According to the minutes of that meeting, "Longwood which has been the nursing mother of reform for more than fifty years, sat by and watched the "sparks fly," and were sorry for the "Anti" in her bereft and lonely condition."

It is not so remarkable that men and women like **William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton** came to Longwood. Those reformers spoke out wherever and whenever they could. They didn't need to come to Longwood to get their names in the paper or their words published, they came so that they could sit down with Pennocks and Darlingtones and Coxes. You came to Longwood, you got put on a committee. Longwood wasn't about hearing experts from outside to tell them what to think. They were welcoming allies in the search for the right. Truth for authority, not authority for truth.

The Longwood Score Card

The anthropologist Margaret Mead is credited with saying, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Did Longwood change the world?

Human slavery in the United States is dead. When I travel on Route 52 south to Delaware, I am no longer crossing a dividing line between a free state and a slave state. Residents of Kennett Square don't have to watch every stranger in town in case they are slave-catchers with shackles in their saddlebags. When Longwood was founded, the extinction of slavery in America seemed a utopian dream to most people, yet slavery fell in little more than a decade.

Though the founders of Longwood spoke of the brotherhood of *man*, they clearly understood humankind to include both men and women. This was a legacy in part of their Quakerism and experiences in the anti-slavery movement. In the 1850s, the idea that women could have independent judgment about political and religious matters was largely considered to be a strange ideas held by Quakers and perhaps a few abolitionists. What Longwood accomplished together with like-minded organizations and individuals, was to change the ideal of gender equality from a sectarian peculiarity of Quakers to a reasonable assumption about how we can all conduct our affairs. Of the fifty-eight individuals who organized this meeting, twenty were women, thirty-five percent of the total. Women were clerks, committee chairs, and speakers at Longwood. How are we doing today as a nation, a century and a half further on? About fourteen percent of Congress is female. At the rate we are going, perhaps the United States can catch up to Longwood sometime toward the end of the next century. However, there are those "small groups of thoughtful citizens" who are working hard to accelerate this purpose.

Sisterhood of Reforms

The Progressive Friends of Longwood thought of a "sisterhood of reforms." They did not confine themselves to a single issue. When the Progressive Friends first met at the Longwood Meetinghouse in May 1855 they produced not only a testimony against slavery, but testimonies on the wrongs of the Indians, the cause and prevention of crime and the evils of tobacco. We learn from the 1855 proceedings testimony that tobacco causes disease -- something that the scientific community established as true a century later. "The moral obligations of one to another demand that the non-tobacco using class of society should be exempt from this flagrant wrong, which is constantly perpetuated by its devotees, who transform this beautiful earth into a reeking, noisome smokehouse by the conversion of 2,000,000 tons of this weed into poisonous vapor . . . By what right does the tobacco-smoker force us to inhale an atmosphere which we know to be not only disagreeable and nauseous in the extreme, but highly detrimental to health?" It only took one hundred and forty years for the dangers of second hand smoke to become recognized as a major health and regulatory concern.

The Uncomfortableness of Reform

The Progressive Friends of Longwood knew they were tackling the big issues, and that solutions were often neither easy nor uncomplicated. The 1855 meeting also issued a testimony on "**The Cause and Prevention of Crime.**" "We have," they wrote, "immense State prisons, with jailors, turnkeys, watchmen, governors, hangmen . . . all employed in administering vengeance on the evil-doer . . . while there does not exist one Commission . . . whose especial province it would be to inquire why it is that one man stands at the bar degraded and scorned, and another, his fellow, sits in judgment on his life." "[I]n all relations to the criminal our conduct must be based on the hope to make him better and not upon a desire for vengeance." Needless to say, the Progressive Friends did not approve of capital punishment. In reading some of the reform literature of the 1840s and 1850s, I sometimes wonder that despite the work of many concerned people over the last century and a half, whether we as a nation have not in fact gone backwards.

War, Peace and Pacifism

War is a big issue, and the prevention of war was a concern of Longwood Friends from their first meeting in 1853 to their last in 1940. Originally their position was quite simple. In 1855, acting on the belief that war was wrong, Longwood sent memorials to the United States Senate and House of Representatives, asking for them "to take immediate steps for the Abolition of the Army and Navy, and to provide for the settlement of international differences by peaceful negotiations or arbitration." But in less than six years, the nation was engaged in a Civil War, a war that Longwood knew was occasioned by slavery. **In 1862, Longwood sent a delegation to President Abraham Lincoln to urge him to abolish slavery as a war measure.** Slavery had been the cause of war and the Progressive Friends came to see the force of the Union army as the mechanism to remove that blot on the nation.

In later years, Longwood was concerned with the extension of American power across the seas and its implications for the relations between nations. In 1898, the United States went to war against Spain for the presumed benefit of the subjected people of the Spanish colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. As a result, the United States found itself in the position of the occupying power in the Philippines, engaged in a long and bloody war with the local population who preferred self government to American rule. The questions of how to disentangle ourselves from this situation were as complicated then as the problems in Iraq and Afghanistan are today.

In 1916, Jesse H. Holmes, who would serve as the last clerk of Longwood, had this to say about the faith of a pacifist. "The pacifist does not deny that wars are inevitable at the present: but he believes that it is the spirit of suspicion, hatred, panic and fear that makes them inevitable. He should, therefore, spend his effort in removing this spirit rather than preparing for war. Such preparation may be safely left those who believe in it, since it is their belief which makes it necessary." Wise words, but perhaps not as pity as those uttered by Sojourner Truth at Longwood in 1874: "You can't give life, so don't take it."

Longwood and Religion

Those Quakers who separated themselves from Western Quarterly Meeting in 1851, and who organized the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends at Old Kennett Meeting House in 1853, imagined a new form of religious organization, based on moral accountability and practical righteousness. They opened this new organization to all who shared this fundamental belief, and that progress was possible. Others came. The main speaker at the dedication of the Longwood meetinghouse in 1855 was the radical anti-slavery Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker. The longest serving clerk at Longwood, Frederick A. Hinckley (1885-1916) was also a Unitarian minister. **Longwood did not create a new denomination, but opened a space where people of "practical righteousness" could work together despite differences in "technical theology."** Most Quakers, like James and Lucretia Mott, who were sympathetic to the ideals of Longwood, nevertheless remained in membership with their Hicksite meetings.

By the early 1870s both the Progressive and Hicksite Friends in Chester County had ample time to cool down from the controversies of the 1840s and 1850s. Kennett Monthly Meeting (Hicksite) invited all those who had been disowned in the 1850s for "setting up a new religious society separate and distinct from the Society of Friends" to be reinstated into membership. Some had moved away, a few had died, but many of those who remained rejoined Kennett Monthly Meeting at this time. There was also a sense that Quakerism had moved ahead. One Progressive Friend wrote to Kennett Monthly Meeting that he was happy to accept the hand of fellowship as there was "nothing in the position of the Progressive Friends at all incompatible with primitive Quakerism."

The original Longwood ideal was of a radical and activist Quakerism. As the twentieth century came on, Quakers as a whole were increasing willing to engage themselves with the world. It is perhaps significant that one of the first General Secretaries of Friends General Conference was Henry Wilbur, reared among Progressive Friends in New York and a participant at Longwood in the 1870s. If you are looking for the roots of modern Quakerism, willing to set aside sectarian differences in order to work with others on peace and civil rights, look to Longwood. By the 1920s, Longwood was back in the Quaker mainstream.

Longwood and Liberal Religion

The Longwood spirit also reached other denominations. In 1908, the National Federation of Religious Liberals was formed in Philadelphia, with the assistance of Jesse Holmes and Henry Wilbur. In 1919, their national meeting was held at Longwood on the two days following the Longwood annual meeting, chaired by Jesse Holmes. This organization brought together Quakers, Unitarians, Universalists, Jews and others who united on the belief that "single handedly, no one man can find the battle for humanity . . . no one church, no one denomination or sect is equal to the task . . . [U]nited and with one mind, liberal men and women of all churches can face the challenge of the day, and by their union can make a better world."

But perhaps the Longwood spirit is better described in the words of William Penn, the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania. "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask, they will know one another, though the diverse liveries they were here make them strangers."

The Last Meeting at Longwood

The eighty-eighth and final meeting at Longwood was held in this building on **September 7 and 8, 1940. Jesse H. Holmes** of Swarthmore spoke, as did A. **Philip Randolph**, the President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and one of the most important African-American civil rights leaders of the day. Music was supplied by students from Cheyney University. The light fixture that had illuminated William Lloyd Garrison and Sojourner Truth was given to the Chester County Historical Society, the speaker's podium to Cheyney University. The records went to Friends Historical Library at Friends Historical Library. The building was later sold and the proceeds of that sale were used to fund a lecture series, named for in memory of Jesse H. Holmes, the last Clerk of Longwood, at Howard University. Bits of Longwood live on in these institutions, as does the Longwood Progressive Friends Meeting House. Descendants of Longwood members remember its witness.

Legacy of Longwood

Historical commemorations such as this are occasions for remembering. An earlier occasion was the Golden Wedding of John and Hannah Cox in 1873. Their old friend, the Quaker poet John J. Whittier, the one-time editor of the *Pennsylvania Freeman* wrote a poem for the occasion. He remembered their role in the Underground Railroad:

For your works of love and duty, that knew no selfish ends, For hearts and doors set open for the bondsman and his friends; For your steady faith and courage, in that dark and evil time, When the Golden Rule was treason, and to feed the hungry, crime; And he remembered their colleagues in the anti-slavery struggle: Of varying creeds, in common cause fused all their hearts in one: God give them, in His mercy now, the peace of duty done. And a couplet very much in the Longwood spirit: And thank you for the lessons, your fifty years are teaching, For honest lives that louder speak than all our noisy preaching.

But Longwood speaks also with the voice of prophecy. Consider the words of that old abolitionist hymn, "The Present Crisis" written by James Russell Lowell in 1844: Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide, In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side; Lowell asks, for his own times and for ours, "Hast thou chosen, O my people, on whose party thou shalt stand?" The Progressive Friends of Longwood made their choices in difficult times. But all times are difficult. The legacy of Longwood is also of religious duty and moral accountability. **As Lucretia Mott put it, "Truth for Authority, Not Authority for Truth." No matter what the government, or the clergy or public opinion said was correct and acceptable, it was the duty of all to search for the truth, and when truth was discovered, to act on it.** Longwood is Margaret Mead's "small ground of thoughtful people" that helped change the world. The concerns of our Chester County Friends who "raised up" Longwood in 1853, and raised up this meetinghouse in 1855, have not, in Quaker terminology been "laid down." Some of the Longwood goals have been realized. Slavery is dead, women can vote. But much remains unfinished. We still live amid wars, and the rumors of wars. In 1855, Progressive Friends sought to create a society without "distinctions on account of color or condition." This and other issues remain to be addressed. But as much as a program for reform, Longwood was also a method. **Men and women of conscience or people of faith should be able to sit down together in a mutual search for Truth.**