

**A Humble but Illustrious History: Quakers in Brooklyn**

Lecture presented by Michael L. Black, February 10, 2008

Brooklyn Friends Meeting House, 110 Schermerhorn Street

150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Erection of the Building

In 1887, for the fiftieth anniversary of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting, the following minute was recorded:

This being the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a Preparative Meeting of the Society of Friends in the city of Brooklyn it is deemed proper to prepare and put upon record a brief Statement of its opening and progress to the present time[.]

Prior to the year 1834 a considerable number of Friends resided in Brooklyn. There being no Friends meeting in that city their practice was to attend the meeting in New York. In 12<sup>th</sup> Mo. 1834 they applied to the monthly meeting of New York to be allowed to hold a meeting in Brooklyn on first day morning and afternoon. Their request, after being considered by a committee, was acceded to by the monthly meeting and a room was procured at the corner of Henry and Cranberry Streets and a meeting was open'd on 1<sup>st</sup> Mo 4<sup>th</sup> 1835 under care of a committee.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Mo 1835 permission was granted to hold a meeting also on 5<sup>th</sup> day morning.

The premises in which the meetings were held not being found sufficiently commodious permission was given to Brooklyn Friends to

lease a plot of ground and build a house at a cost of 3000 to \$3500 to be raised by Voluntary Subscription[.] Under this permission a lease of 10 years was obtained of the premises corner of Clark and Henry St and a convenient frame building was erected at a cost of \$3,625 75/100.

A Preparative meeting was established by the Monthly Meeting, as one of its branches and opened in 11<sup>th</sup> Mo 1837[.]

By an enumeration made at that time it appears that there were 105 members of our Society residing in Brooklyn and their names were recorded in the first part of the Preparative meeting Book of Minutes.

In 1856 it appears that a change of location had become desirable, and the monthly meeting authorised the purchase of five lots each 25 by 100 feet on Schermerhorn near Boerum St at \$2000 a lot on which a substantial brick building 50 by 60 feet was erected, at a cost of about \$16,500, in which a meeting was opened 10<sup>th</sup> Mo 1857, and which continues to be occupied for the purpose to the present time.<sup>1</sup>

Researching Quaker history in Brooklyn should involve one trip, or several, to the recently refurbished Brooklyn Historical Society at the corner of Clinton and Pierrepont streets. In the beautiful, wood-paneled, book-filled library, one can step back into a very different world, especially with the very large (and very handsome) maps of Brooklyn. From one of these, the researcher can learn that in 1860, just three years after its construction, our meeting house sits within a very different downtown Brooklyn from today's crowded metropolis. It exists in a kind of isolation on Schermerhorn Street, with

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<sup>1</sup> Brooklyn Monthly Minutes, 1887. (Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.)

an open space (perhaps a farm or field) in the back, a number of houses on the north side of the street, and to the east of the meeting house, a “Florist’s Garden.”

Only two decades later, another map presents a much more crowded, even cluttered area. Now, the Meeting House is no longer the sole church building in the nearby area, as if the outside world had begun to impinge on the semi-rural structure of 1860. As Brooklyn continued to expand, more and more religious institutions were erected, so that the *city* (as it was until it became a borough in 1898) did indeed become “the borough of churches.” By 1884, when new churches had been built (often in the middle of blocks of houses—and therefore not always easy to locate on the map), our meeting house had become more and more a part of an urban cityscape. The size and the emptiness of its property make it stand out and not simply meld into the new stores and new houses.

Today, during what some have called the “renaissance” of downtown Brooklyn (and much of the rest of the borough), the Meeting House remains a splendid anomaly, just three stories high (as is the former Brooklyn Friends School adjacent) “overpowered” by the fourteen-story Criminal Court building (built in 1932), almost dwarfed by the more recently constructed seven-story apartment house where the parking lot used to be, the Transit Authority’s twelve stories, and especially the Brooklyn Law School’s twenty-two stories across Boerum Place.

When, for today’s lecture, I considered what unifying device, what thread, there was, something to make sense of and to organize the century and a half of the Meeting House’s existence, I thought more and more of those large buildings around us. This intrusion of the modern world seemed to me to represent a continuing theme in our 150-

year history: how, when, and why *we* (not the outside world) dealt with the outside world, how we moved from a closed, special society of believers who in the past often had as little contact with the wider world as possible, to our present state, when we try to uphold our principles in a world that sometimes seems indifferent to or unconcerned about our testimonies.

I have selected three aspects of our history to explore in today's lecture, which, it seems to me, illustrate our continued and continuing involvement with this outside world. They are three narratives, as it were, of Quakers interacting with the outside world, witnessing for their beliefs, and living their continuing social concerns through education, prison reform, and the peace testimony. The three examples are the following: first, the development of Brooklyn Friends School; second, the Meeting's Newgate project in cooperation with the Brooklyn House of Detention (May, 1973, to November, 1979); and third, the individual Quaker witness against war, as represented by Mary S. McDowell (born 1876, died 1955).

Only ten years after the Meeting House was constructed, on December 27, 1866, a committee of six women was formed "to take the subject [of a meeting school] under consideration." A month later, on Jan. 31, 1867, the committee reported that "women Friends" supported such a school, and another committee of five women was formed to confer with a committee from the Men's Meeting. On March 6, 1867, the Trustees of New York Monthly Meeting "were authorized to open a school as proposed should way open for it after examination. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Less than one year after the planning for Brooklyn Friends School had started, the school opened on Sept. 9, 1867. The cost of preparing the "commodious apartments" was

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<sup>2</sup> Edgerton Grant North, *Seventy-Five Years of Brooklyn Friends School* (N. p.: n. p., 1942) 6-7.

\$942.52, the tuition per quarter of ten weeks was \$12 or \$15, there were twenty-two pupils (only eleven of whom were Quaker children), and there was one department and one teacher: Mary Haviland, who earned \$400 a year.<sup>3</sup>

In the announcement to the public, one paragraph is noticeable:

“It is the hope of the Trustees to establish this institution on a basis of increasing usefulness, and no means will be spared on their part to render it attractive to all who desire for their children a thorough, practical and guarded education.”<sup>4</sup>

Six years later, in 1873, enrollment had increased, there were three teachers, tuition was \$10, \$12 or \$15 per quarter, and drawing and French were extra at \$5 each. In 1885, because of continuing increase in enrollment, another building adjacent to the Meeting House was constructed (at a cost of \$5,000), and in 1888, two additional lots on Schermernhorn St. were purchased for \$12,000, “to guard against [their] being used for purposes that might interfere with the Satisfactory use of our property for meeting or School purposes.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1902, a larger, two-story building, with a basement, replaced the 1885 building. In 1907-08, the first two years of an upper school began, and in 1917, a gymnasium was added. In 1920, a high-school building known as the Phoebe Anna Thorne High School was constructed, replacing the brownstone building adjoining the school, donated by the

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<sup>3</sup> North, 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in North, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Brooklyn Monthly Minutes, 1887. (Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College).

trustees of the estate of Phoebe Anna Thorne. In 1926, a third floor was added to the main building.

In the final major acquisition of property by Brooklyn Friends School, the former Poly Prep Athletic Field on Avenue M was purchased in the 1920s, and in 1935, a field house (which still exists with “Friends” prominently displayed) was constructed.<sup>6</sup>

In 1957, the Middle States Association, as part of its re-accreditation process, encouraged Brooklyn Friends School “to give careful study to a program of acquiring a new physical plant on a more desirable site,” in part because enrollment had grown to 300 students, which taxed the older facilities.

Ten years later, the plan for such a move was underway. In 1969, the former Brooklyn Law School at 375 Pearl Street was purchased for \$775,000 plus closing costs, with a mortgage of \$625,000. After extensive renovations, the new Brooklyn Friends School opened in October, 1972. As part of the financing, Friends Field was sold to New York City in January, 1973, for \$1,947,500.<sup>7</sup>

Since 1972, Friends School has been located at 375 Pearl Street, not even a half-mile from its former site at 112 Schermerhorn Street. New York Quarterly Meeting continues to own the site of the old school, which is currently leased to the New York City Board of Education for use as Pacific High School. The buildings at 112

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<sup>6</sup> North, 17, 18-19, 25, 28, and 29.

<sup>7</sup> “Supporting Documents: Proposal for Property Transfer Brooklyn Friends School April 20, 2008,” presented to New York Quarterly Meeting, April 20, 2008.

Schermerhorn are now the largest source of income for New York Quarterly Meeting (the annual rental of over \$370,000 makes up almost 30 % of the Quarter's revenues).<sup>8</sup>

Brooklyn Friends School was a physical part of the Meeting House for more than a century, from 1867 to 1972. In the more than three decades since the move, BMM and BFS, although they are a short walk from one another, seemed to have grown more and more distant from each other. Over these years, both School and Meeting have, from time to time, struggled with their relationship to each other. In this anniversary year, it seems fitting, therefore, to observe that relations between the two communities are improving: the Meeting now has a very active Care Relations Committee which seeks to strengthen the ties between the two Quaker communities. In addition, in this anniversary year, in another sign of development, BFS has petitioned New York Quarterly Meeting to go its own fiscal way, i. e., to own 375 Pearl Street for itself, and to form a 501 (c) 3 corporation. Separate incorporation has recently been agreed to in principle, and transfer of property remains under discussion.<sup>9</sup>

The interest in Brooklyn Quakers in establishing a school only ten years after the construction of its meeting house, and the continued governance support of the school which the Meeting and the Quarter have provided over the years raise the question: why have Quakers been so interested in education? Leonard S. Kenworthy, the noted Quaker

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<sup>8</sup> In 2007, the amount was \$371,799.00. The lease runs from July 1, 1998, to June 30, 2010, with rents increasing gradually from \$264,693.60 to \$371,799.. From 1973 to 1989, New York Quarterly Meeting received \$45,480 to \$85,275, and from 1990 to 1997, it received \$172,824 to \$211,516.. Nancy Hadly-Jaffe to the author, November 16, 2001

<sup>9</sup> Minutes, New York Quarterly Meeting, January, 2008.

educator and former member of this meeting, in his *Quaker Education: A Sourcebook*, lists 75 schools, colleges, and adult study centers under the care of Friends, of which fourteen are colleges.<sup>10</sup> For a denomination of 90,000 to 110,000,<sup>11</sup> this is a remarkable indication of Friends' concern for education.

Many of these schools were founded in the nineteenth century, a time when Quakers' attitude toward the outside world was changing. Friends had, almost from their beginnings in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century in Great Britain, been concerned about education, but not in the form of vain speculations and too much book-learning. Indeed, they were anti-intellectual, contending that since there was the seed of God in everyone, that seed would grow and flourish not by worldly means and certainly not with "hireling priests." Nevertheless, Friends realized that their children needed good education, especially to combat the learning of the Episcopalian Church, which was the established church in Great Britain.

In nineteenth-century America, Quakers found themselves, willy-nilly, confronted with certain outward realities. For instance, their attempts to remain neutral during the Revolution had been misunderstood and deemed traitorous by patriots and loyalists alike. As the nation became more and more urban, Friends found themselves less and less in splendid isolation but more and more in contact and contention with other religious groups. Much as Friends distrusted evangelism and other manifestations of Christianity, they realized they had to do something to prepare their children for life in a world in which they were a distinct and uneducated minority.

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<sup>10</sup> Leonard Kenworthy, *Quaker Education: A Source Book* (Kennett Square, PA.: Quaker Publications, [1987] 339-42.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hamm, *The Quakers in America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 151.



Early Quakers looked with disapproval on the schools of the day, many of which remained little changed since the Middle Ages, with emphasis on Latin and Greek. In contrast to the classical bent of many schools of the day, Friends stressed the *usefulness* of education. William Penn sounds almost like American Transcendentalist reformers of the nineteenth century in this analysis:

We press their memory too soon, and puzzle, strain and load them with words and rules; to know grammar and rhetoric, and a strange tongue or two that it is ten to one may never be useful to them, leaving their natural genius to mechanical and physical or natural knowledge uncultivated and neglected, which would be of exceeding use and pleasure to them through the whole course of their lives.<sup>12</sup>

The combination of the use and the *pleasure* of education even today seems revolutionary. This is only one of several ways in which Friends' education was innovative: they promoted the education of girls, and they early established co-educational schools.

In 1867, had Friends in Brooklyn been concerned about a “guarded education” for their children, they could have sent their children across the East River to Friends Seminary, which had been started in 1781. However, the daily trip would involve a horse car to Fulton Ferry, a short ferry ride to Manhattan, and then another horse car or a short walk to the other Pearl Street in Manhattan (the school moved to Rutherford Place in

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<sup>12</sup> Barbour, Hugh, et al. *Quaker Crosscurrents: Three Hundred Years of Friends in the New York Yearly Meetings* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995) 147.

1860). Moreover, Friends Seminary then had the reputation of “a worldly finishing school. . . where children were guarded against the poor and socially impure.”<sup>13</sup>

Another possible choice was Packer Collegiate Institute, on Remsen Street, but the adjective suggested not the useful but the college-preparatory.

Catholic parochial schools were, of course, not an option.

Or they could have sent their children to local public schools. However, compared to Manhattan, where public education was much more common, the district system in Brooklyn educated fewer than half the city’s children; “56 percent of the school-age children received no schooling of any kind.”<sup>14</sup>

As I look back on the history of the relations between the Meeting and the School, the most dramatic event occurred when the Meeting House was threatened with demolition.

After ninety years of humble existence on Schermerhorn Street, Friends were surprised in 1947 to learn that their meeting house as well as Brooklyn Friends School was scheduled for demolition by the City of New York. The powers-that-be wanted to erect a new, \$6,000,000 jail. The resulting campaign, which succeeded in stopping the proposed demolition, exhibits vividly how Friends could adopt some of the ways of the outside world by collaborating with politicians, clergymen, and supporters of Quakers to preserve and protect their properties.

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<sup>13</sup> *Quaker Crosscurrents* 149.

<sup>14</sup> Ravitch, Diane. *The Great School War: History of the New York Public Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) 72.

One reason for a new jail was to empty the notorious Raymond Street Jail (also known as the Kings County Jail), which had housed a growing number of prisoners, in increasingly cramped conditions, since 1838. (So infamous was this jail that the name Raymond Street disappeared from the map of Brooklyn, to be replaced by Ashland Place). A new jail at Schermerhorn Street and Boerum Place could be connected to the fourteen story Criminal Court building, which had been erected in 1932, at the corner of Smith and Schermerhorn by some sort of walkway.

When Friends heard of the proposal, which they understood had already progressed as far as the Board of Estimate, a relocation committee was formed, with sub-committees for an appraisal, use of space, financial requirements, a building committee, and a committee to obtain information about other independent schools. Samuel B. Williams, clerk of New York Monthly Meeting, served as clerk of the special committee, which met on April 30, 1947. Moving quickly, three days later, Williams contacted an appraiser, a realtor (to suggest possible sites), and others. On July 14, the committee reviewed estimated costs and decided to contact Robert Moses. One month later, they considered a proposal to buy Erasmus Field (between Friends Field and McDonald Avenue) and requested an estimate from Turner Construction Company on the cost of building a new school. On December 1, the committee reviewed building costs and the appraisal of its two properties. They also reported on a meeting with the Consulting Engineer of the Brooklyn President's office, who had told them that the necessary approvals would be ready in February, title would be taken by March, and construction would begin in fall, 1948.

In the meantime, a campaign of letter-writing and contacting elected officials, under the direction of the public relations firm of Merrill Anderson Co. had begun. Its letter, “sent to hundreds of non-Friends,” claimed that the new jail would leave this branch (the Hicksites) without “a single place of worship in the Borough.” Anderson also pointed out that the City owned the property across Smith Street from the County Court Building, which did not need to be condemned and which could also be connected to the court by a walkway. He also refuted the contention that a recent jail break, after which new security had been installed, was a reason for promptness.<sup>15</sup>

The 1947-1948 proposal is another indication of the City’s former attitude towards much of its architectural history, which the Landmarks Act of 1965 has in some ways addressed. No, it could not happen again, but without the co-operation of powerful non-Friends and the important connections of Friends, the meeting and the school could have joined Penn Station, the old Delmonico’s Restaurant, the Produce Exchange, the Tombs, the City Hall Post Office, the Brevoort House, “Colonnade Row” (in Brooklyn), numerous churches, the Western Union Building, and the Astor Hotel.

Quaker education at Brooklyn Friends School, from its humble beginning in the basement of our meeting house, now flourishes just a short distance away in downtown Brooklyn. In 2008, what is different about a Quaker education? What makes it so desirable? If the old Quaker ideal of a “guarded education” is no longer talked about, a more modern understanding of Quaker education has replaced the 1867 need for

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<sup>15</sup> The above paragraphs are based on documents in the archives of Brooklyn Friends School.

protection against things of the world. Richard Eldridge, former Head of Friends Seminary, speaks eloquently about the aims of a Quaker education:

The aim of learning. . . is to make whatever testimonies we live by more of a need than a choice. . . . So that it becomes unthinkable *not* to serve others. So that it becomes unthinkable *not* to consider all humans of the same family. So that a Schweitzerian “reverence for life” becomes a need rather than a self-conscious choice. Then. . . some of our testimonies may have more meaning.<sup>16</sup>

Consider the phrase “the Schweitzerian ‘reverence for life’.” In some ways, it is an echo of Friends’ belief in “that of God in each person.” This core belief has led Friends to seek social justice in many areas, from their first gatherings in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England to the present day: in addition to concerns about education, Friends have refused to serve in war and to support war-related activities, worked for prison reform, established schools for slaves and Native-Americans, joined the Abolitionist movement, agitated for equal rights for women, and participated in the civil rights movement.

And that brings me to part two of my talk today.

Although prison reform was not, like education, a consistent theme of Brooklyn Quakers, it became a focal issue in the early 1970s and resulted in the creation of an unusual approach to helping prison families: the Newgate Project, which provided child

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<sup>16</sup> *Faith and Practice: The Book of Discipline of the New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends* (New York: New York Yearly Meeting, 1998) 42.

care for children of women while they visited their partners at the Brooklyn House of Detention two short blocks away from Brooklyn Monthly Meeting.

Before I discuss this part of Brooklyn Quakerism, it is necessary to give some background information about Quakers' long and continuing concern with both prisons and prison reform.

Unlike many other religious groups, Friends became all too familiar with penology (or what passed for it) in seventeenth-century England, where “[t]housands. . . were imprisoned and treated like common criminals. . . .” Not only were many subjected to brutish physical treatment, but they found themselves, not in Club Fed conditions, but in “unventilated, over-crowded [rooms] covered with filth and alive with vermin.” Male and female prisoners were sometimes not separated, there was no difference between prisoners awaiting trial and those sentenced, and there was no work, no license plates, no nothing. In British jails, all were equal: the sane and insane, the young and the old, the innocent and the guilty, the men, women, and children.<sup>17</sup>

And you paid for your own food and your own upkeep, for which your guards padded their meager salaries. If you wanted any kind of decent treatment, you paid for it. Quakers, however, refused to pay bribes.

In the lobby of Brooklyn Meeting House is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century print of one of our distinguished ancestors, the first systematic prison reformer, Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845). In 1813 she discovered, in one of the worst London prisons—Newgate, a “hell on earth”—that, after more than a century, living conditions in jail had not improved, although there was at least a women’s section. Her work, and that of her association,

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<sup>17</sup> Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years* (Wallingford, PA.: Pendle Hill Publications, 2002) 184-85.

helped make prisons peaceable and industrious, and children were even clothed and schooled.<sup>18</sup>

In America, in the colony of Pennsylvania, William Penn was able to reduce the number of capital crimes from two hundred to two, and the colony became famous for its progressive penology. Travelling Friends insisted on visiting prisons and prisoners.<sup>19</sup>

The Newgate Project at Brooklyn Friends Meeting began in May, 1973, after an inquiry by Mary Holliday, the only female correctional officer at the Brooklyn House of Detention; she challenged Quakers to live up to our testimony about the treatment of prisoners, especially when those prisoners were only a block or two away. At the time, children who visited relatives at the facility had no place to play and no one to look after them while they awaited visits to their fathers.

Stan and Jeanne Ellin of Brooklyn Meeting described the “Dickensian scene” at the House of Detention:

Visiting mothers were only allowed to bring one child at a time to visit their fathers. Some fathers did not want their children to see them under these conditions. One way or another, the waiting room always seemed full of children from babes in arms to young teen-agers. The atmosphere, charged with sorrow, fear, despair, was the worst conceivable for any child to endure even for a little while. Some children were left

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<sup>18</sup> Brinton 186.

<sup>19</sup> Brinton 185-86.

unattended in the street outside, no matter the weather or the danger of the traffic.

Friends set up a child-care facility in the social room of the Meeting House, with a staff and with volunteers, most of whom were from our meeting. A pamphlet in English and in Spanish announced “Free Childcare” for infants and children up to the age of 12 on Monday to Thursday from 3 pm to 6 pm. On Mondays and Tuesdays, when one child could visit, volunteers brought the child to the booth at the House of Detention at the start of the visit. Other children could remain at Newgate. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, when children were not allowed to visit, they could stay at Newgate.<sup>20</sup>

One new member of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting served on the Newgate Committee as one of her first committees, since the Meeting House was near her place of work (a downtown division of Brooklyn College). She often picked up her daughter Jessica from Brooklyn Friends School and took her there. For this new Friend, the most important person at Newgate, the “guiding light,” was Tarna Infante, whom she describes as follows:

. . . another young woman in meeting with a young child. She was my exact opposite: she was that I thought of a “hippy”: she was poor, she dressed in second-hand clothes; she rode a bike; she smoked pot. She also had a deep faith and leading toward prison work and attempted to awaken

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<sup>20</sup> Jeanne and Stanley Ellin, “The Newgate Project,” *Friends Journal*, February 1, 1977: 82.



the conscience of the meeting about its next-door neighbors at the jail.

First, there were efforts to establish a bail bond fund; then the idea of providing hospitality for families of inmates during visiting hours arose.

We had the space; we were nearby; we had enough people interested in volunteering.<sup>21</sup>

If you had the typical, 40-hours-a-week job, you could not do much to help Newgate, so Brooklyn Friends relied on parents (usually female) who had flexible working schedules or were the old-fashioned, stay-at-home moms. These women often brought their children, in part to introduce them to the world of service and in part because they could not leave them at home.

Some Friends children who were regular attenders at Newgate included Jessica Fleischer-Black, Nate Ford, Caroline and Graham Holley, and Yvette Infante. They were exposed to children very different from them in terms of race and class, but they participated joyfully.

One important activity at Newgate was taking photos of children and placing them on a bulletin board in the social room. The activity, entitled “Family Fotos for Prisoners,” under the direction of Ruth Pressman, who then worked for Macy’s, resulted in a large collection of color photographs of Newgate visitors which are now in the Meeting’s archives on the third floor. Families of prisoners enjoyed having the pictures posted and receiving copies, and the Meeting could see some of the results of the Newgate Project. Some of the photographs were used by inmates in their dealings with

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<sup>21</sup> Nancy B. Black, “Witness and Newgate Discussion Group,” November 14, 2004. BMM archives.

prison and parole officials to indicate their family ties, in one case assisting an inmate get parole and in another case, helping a distressed mother.

Ruth Pressman also produced a videotape about Newgate, with poetry, lyrics, and music by inmates.

The Newgate Project was laid down in November, 1979, for several reasons: first, a new Federal law permitted contact visits (previously, the House of Detention had fifty-two booths with Plexiglass and a telephone for each booth), which made Newgate's child care more difficult, especially by requiring full dinners (not just snacks), increased security procedures, and changes in procedures for visiting (more than one child at a time could visit), making the logistics for Newgate volunteers more complicated); second, the City's financial troubles during the 1970s meant that funds for the Department of Corrections were often in danger of being reduced; and third, Friends' resources proved inadequate. Staffing a child-care center for four different days a week, which included City permissions for this and that and which included hiring a co-ordinator, was not easy. Friends found the world of fund-raising, especially for an organization with a small budget, no easy task. The largest grants that Newgate received were \$15,000 and \$10,000, but too often grants of more than \$1000 arrived for only one year and were not renewed. As the budget rose from an initial \$4900 to \$20,000 in the final year, fund-raising became more and more burdensome.

The annual report of Newgate of December 27, 1978, indicates some of the complications created by the institution of contact visits:

. . . [such visits were] offset by the dehumanizing effect of increased waiting time, elaborate screening procedures (including body searches), and the institution of a series of waiting areas, each separated by a Kafka-like array of locked doors.<sup>22</sup>

Friends advocated a smoother-running visiting procedure at the House of Detention. More importantly, they wanted the Department of Correction to share responsibility for the children. For several months in 1978, discussions with the department went nowhere, until the arrival of a new warden, Warden Greco, in December, 1978, who asked for a proposal for a childcare area in the waiting room at the jail, which, however, was never created because, said the warden, of legal problems.

Relations with the Department of Correction were sometimes strained, although the Newgate contact, Mary Holliday, did her best to persuade her superiors of the value of the project. Newgate seemed, in fact, to get along better with the correction guards than prison officials, who, Newgate charged, fought the implementation of contact visits as hard as and as long as possible.

Newgate even survived the temporary removal to Pacific High School during the 1976 renovation of the Meeting House.

In the final report on Newgate, on February 10, 1980, the clerk, Allen C. Fischer, remarked that “Considering the lack of overhead costs and the contributions of volunteers, the Project must be considered to be one of the most cost-effective of its kind.” He also noted the “unsuccessful attempt to establish a chapter of Prison Families Anonymous” as well as the “changed circumstances” which made it difficult, if not

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<sup>22</sup> December 27, 1978, in BMM archives

impossible, for Newgate to function as it had.<sup>23</sup> On February 10, 1980, the Newgate Committee was laid down.

Reading through the log books and the annual Newgate reports, one can glimpse some of the small victories for humanity that Newgate scored: a prisoner just released stops at Newgate to see Tarna Infante “to express to her his feeling of gratitude for removing one burden from his mind, that was what was happening to his child during the long waiting period that preceded each visit”;<sup>24</sup> a thank-you card signed by 106 inmates;<sup>25</sup> children in our playground shouting to their father, who shouts back;<sup>26</sup> mothers and children staying around so their father can watch them from a window of the House of Detention;<sup>27</sup> the Newgate staff sending birthday cards to children; and the Christmas parties.

Newgate succeeded in its ultimate goal: the “complete transferal of children to the waiting room at the Brooklyn House of Detention.”<sup>28</sup> That goal also included a transferal of the spirit of the Newgate Project, and again I quote from the annual report of December 28, 1978:

We hope to transfer the feeling of love and support that was present in the Meeting house to the waiting room itself, while continuing to provide information and emotional support to adult family members through [Prison Families Anonymous] activities.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Allen C. Fischer, clerk, 02-10-80, Brooklyn Monthly Meeting Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Logbook, 05-11-75, Brooklyn Monthly Meeting Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Logbook, 09-07-76, Brooklyn Monthly Meeting Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Logbook, Brooklyn Monthly Meeting Archives.

<sup>27</sup> Logbook, Brooklyn Monthly Meeting Archives.

<sup>28</sup> P. 5, “The Newgate Project: Final Report,” December 27, 1978. Brooklyn Monthly Meeting Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

The Department of Corrections took over child care at the House of Detention, Quakers laid down the Newgate Project, and one aspect of Friends' service closed. So, eventually, did the House of Detention close, although the edifice is still there, a hulking reminder of an unpleasant past.

Today, since New York State has populated much of upstate with correctional facilities, in part to give much-needed employment to depressed economic areas and in part to make it difficult to visit those incarcerated, other reminders of New York's prisons are harder to find. Parents must now make hours-long journeys by bus, often with their children in tow, to visit with their partners. Newgate, in its small way, helped to relieve some of the pressures of time and distance.

The nearest New York State correctional facility is at Arthur Kill on Staten Island, where there is a small Quaker worship group, but for a variety of reasons, Quakers are not as active there as we would like them to be.

John McWhorter, an African-American linguist and columnist for the *New York Sun*, is convinced that recidivism is one of the most serious problems for released prisoners. The percentage of those who return to prison is high, and, as he contends, little is done about recidivism. Released prisoners often get only a new suit, a bit of money, and they are on their own.

In Newark, the American Friends Service Committee has for several years run an anti-recidivism program, with some success, but post-prison projects are not very much in favor, nor, for that matter, are in-prison projects run by the government. Once in America, many people believed that prisons should try as much as possible to rehabilitate prisoners. Today, however, many Americans seem to want prisons to rid the populace of

undesirables, in the hope that ignoring them will make them go away. Yet prisoners pay their debt to society, and society continues to ignore or avoid them.

The Newgate Project received respectful press attention, there was a New York City award, and perhaps the project served as an example for the many current Newgate projects listed on the Internet, almost all of them free of government control.

Newgate probably did little to solve many of the pressing issues of incarceration, but it was successful on a much different level: it brought the love and care of Friends to a near-by jail, just as our current Community Dinner Committee brings the love and care of Friends to those in our surrounding community who are hungry. It was a small project, a micro-effort, but it was indicative of some of the things that Friends do well: think creatively about solutions to problems, make effective use of limited resources, organize activities, find outside funding, and work together harmoniously.

The third and final section of my talk this afternoon focuses not on our testimony of education, or prison reform, but on one individual and her advocacy of Friends' traditional "peace testimony." This testimony is best expressed in the "Declaration of Friends to Charles II" in 1660 by the Elders of Balby:

We utterly deny all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatever, and this is our testimony to the whole world. The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never

move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.<sup>30</sup>

Mary S. McDowell (1876-1955), a member of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting, not only believed in this testimony her entire life, but acted on it—and paid the penalty. She was a birthright Quaker, born in Jersey City, from which her family moved to New York and Brooklyn. She graduated from Friends Seminary and from Swarthmore College, attended Oxford University as a Lucretia Mott Scholar, and earned an M. A. from Columbia in 1900 in Classics.

She taught Latin, Greek, and English first at Friends' Academy in Locust Valley, N.Y.; Jersey City High School; Richmond Hill High School in Queens, and from 1908 to 1917 and 1923 to 1931 at Manual Training School in Brooklyn. She then moved to Abraham Lincoln High School, also in Brooklyn, in 1931 and retired in 1943.

She is best known for her 1918 dismissal by the Board of Education for “conduct unbecoming to a teacher,” a casualty of this nation’s suppression of the liberty of conscience during the First World War. In 1923, she was restored to her position as a teacher, receiving five years of credit for her pension, although no salary for the five years she had been kept from the classroom.

To understand the significance of her actions and to explain the *Weltanschauung* of the times, let me attempt to explain what she faced in the United States of the day.

World War I began in August, 1914, but for a variety of reasons the United States did not enter “the war to end all wars” until almost three years later, in April, 1917. Two

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<sup>30</sup> *Faith and Practice*, 1998, 38-39

large ethnic groups did not advocate entering the war on the side of the Allies: the Irish, who were opposed to pretty much anything their British overlords advocated; and the Germans, who remained loyal to the Fatherland and to German culture.

For the first time in its history, the United States, forced to confront a large foreign war, was torn apart by two opposing views. So prevalent was anti-German sentiment that just about anything German was questioned or actively opposed. For instance, with unusual patriotic fervor, many orchestras dropped the three B's (Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms) from their concerts, things Teutonic were renamed ("frankfurter" became "hot dog," and "sauerkraut" became "liberty cabbage," for example), and here in Brooklyn, two streets were renamed (Vienna Avenue in Red Hook became Lorraine Street, and Dresden Street in Bushwick became Highland Place).<sup>31</sup>

In addition, the country was urged to spy on fellow-citizens, Congress passed laws forbidding anti-government language, and the Post Office stripped the mailing privileges of many antiwar publications, which then ceased publication. Disagreement and dissent were simply not tolerated.

In this inflammatory atmosphere, Mary McDowell was accused of the odd-sounding offense, "Conduct Unbecoming to a Teacher." What had she done to persuade the Board of Education to this step, which included two hearings in January and May, 1918? The Board of Superintendents listed seven specifications:

1. "did not consider it right to resist by force the invasion of our country. . . .";
2. she "did not want to help the United States government in carrying on the present war. . . .";

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<sup>31</sup> Leonard Benaro and Jennifer Weis, *Brooklyn by Name: How the Neighborhoods, Streets, Parks, Bridges and More Got Their Names* (New York: NYU Press, 2206) 3.



3. she “would not *urge* her pupils to perform Red Cross services which either promote the war of the United States against the German Government, or better the condition of the schools in the field”;
  4. she “would not *urge* her pupils to support the war. . .”;
  5. she “would not *urge* her students to buy Thrift Stamps” to help fund the war effort;
  6. she did not believe that “a *teacher* is under a *special* obligation to train his or her pupils to support the United States Government in its measures for carrying on the war”;
- and, finally, 7. “she is opposed to the war of the United States against the German Government.”<sup>32</sup>

Her answers to questions from the Board are remarkable for their humility, their kindness, and their consideration of a differing point of view. For example, when she was closely questioned (three times) about “urging” the students to buy Thrift Stamps, she replied that she would not so “urge” them and that “the pupils have their personal liberty and personal reasons.”<sup>33</sup>

For her refusal to support the war and her refusal to act as a new-model teacher, she was relieved of her post. In 1923, in part because of post-war concern over the harsh treatment of some opponents of World War I (Eugene B. Debs, the Socialist leader, was pardoned by President Warren G. Harding, for instance), at the request of her lawyer,

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<sup>32</sup> Anna L. Curtis, *Mary S. McDowell: A Biographical Sketch* (New York: New York Monthly Meeting, 1960) 29-30.

<sup>33</sup> Curtis 32.

John Broomell, the Board reinstated her, remarking that “the punishment inflicted on Miss McDowell was too severe, or at least *in the light of present circumstances*, too severe. The case of Miss McDowell is entirely different from that of the disloyal teacher.”<sup>34</sup>

She returned to the Manual Training High School in 1923, with her five years of pension credit, until 1931, when she transferred to Abraham Lincoln High School, retiring in 1943.

She continued her work for peace as long as she could, joining the War Resisters’ League and other pacifist groups (often paying for pamphlets which she distributed on the subway), supporting them as best she could financially and practically, and earning the praise of Bayard Rustin, among others. She spent her last years opposing the Korean War.

She has been honored in the naming of the Mary McDowell Center for Learning on Bergen Street in Brooklyn, partly through the efforts of her friend Violet Longobardi, late of this Meeting. She has also been the subject of a television program in 1964 in the series “Profiles in Courage.”

Quaker practice requires a “memorial minute” for each deceased member, our form of eulogy. Hers is worth quoting in full:

Mary Stone McDowell, a birthright Friend and devoted member of Brooklyn Preparative Meeting, died on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1955 after several months illness. Those who knew her will always remember her for the values which she so untiringly and staunchly upheld. These were, love for all mankind, seeking for truth wherever it might lead, and justice for all.

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<sup>34</sup> Curtis,7. Emphasis added.

She lived in selfless simplicity, close to her Heavenly Father, devoting her time, her thought, her every effort toward bringing about a peaceful and better world for all her fellowmen. Gentle and serene in the face of endless obstacles, she spent herself courageously for others. Her spirit will continue to be a living inspiration to those who knew her. She was a true Friend.

No one more consistently adhered to Friends' principles. She applied those principles to the problems—social, political, and economic—of the world in which she lived. She did not live in a vacuum; hers was a growing faith in the effectiveness of love to keep peace with the changing world. The example she set is an everliving contribution toward a better world.

Minute Adopted by Brooklyn Preparative Meeting, First Month, 1956;

VINCENT LONGOBARDI, JR. CLERK. <sup>35</sup>

We have come full circle in this appreciation of some of the workings of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting: from corporate outreach (Brooklyn Friends School), to corporate philanthropy (the Newgate Project), and to one individual (Mary S. McDowell). For a century and a half, Brooklyn Quakers have built not only a “beloved community” but extended that love, concern, and care to the world at large, the world that is “too much with us; late and soon, /Getting and spending. . . .”

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<sup>35</sup> Curtis vii.

Members of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting have continued to follow their leadings and respond to Quaker testimonies. The Vigil Against the Death Penalty, the Peace and Social Action Committee, the LGBTQ Concerns Committee; the Community Dinner Committee, and others all continue to work for social justice, for gender diversity, and for our less fortunate neighbors.

At the Quarterly Meeting level, members of Brooklyn serve on committees such as Audit and Budget, the board of Brooklyn Friends School, the Great Lakes Region (Africa) Education Committee, the Cemetery Committee, the board of Mary McDowell Center for Learning, the Educational Fund, the Relief Fund, and Quarterly Trustees.

For the larger New York Yearly Meeting, Brooklyn Friends are represented on committees for Black Concerns, the Barrington Dunbar Committee, Conflict Transformation, World Ministry, and the boards of Powell House and the Oakwood School.

With over two hundred members, Brooklyn Monthly Meeting is sometimes stretched to maintain and fill its Quaker obligations. We live in a world very different from that of one hundred and fifty years ago. Now, both husband and wife work outside the house, have many worldly pressures and obligations, and are much more engaged with the outer world. In 1857, by contrast, our ancestors lived more simply and concentrated on their “beloved community,” sometimes disciplining members for sleeping in meeting, not attending meeting consistently, exogamous marriage (“marrying out” of meeting), for defamation and distraction, for dress, for failure in business, for gaming, for observing “holy days,” for taking oaths, for scandal, for slavery, for tavern-going, and for shoddy business practices.

Considering the number of committees which Friends have created, new Quakers or those interested in Quakerism should indeed consider carefully and prayerfully not so much *why* they wish to join the Society of Friends but *how* they will act as members. In other words, Quakerism can (and should be) much more than the sacred 11am-12pm worship on First Day. “Seasoned” Quakers understand that Quakerism is much more (and much more time-consuming) than First Day worship alone.

**Revised 5-1-08**

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