THE QUAKER MIGRATION, 1675–1725

Historical Background

England went through the greatest revolution in its history in the half-century between the founding of Massachusetts in 1630 and Pennsylvania in 1682. Quakerism grew out of the turmoil of that period.

Charles I was tried by the High Court of Justice and sent to the scaffold on January 30, 1649. The regicide shocked the people and there was a decline in traditional authority. Some feared that the extreme of egalitarianism that was now everywhere presaged a reversion to primitivism. After the decline of formalism, the exradicals became zealots and hunted the newer radicals (Baltzell, 1979, p. 82). About 200 new religious sects arose during the period immediately following the British Civil War, among which Quakerism was the most appealing and flourished (Pratt, 1985, p. 21).

The Quakers marked the extreme left wing of the English Reformation. After a century of reform, religious authority in England—once lodged in the Pope and priests, then in the Anglican bishops and priests, and finally in local preachers interpreting the Bible—was suddenly transformed by the radically individualistic and subjective doctrine of the Inner Light. The hierarchical, yet reforming, ethic of the Puritans gave way to the radical egalitarianism of the Quakers (Baltzell, 1979, p. 83).

Among the founders of Quakerism were many who led a return to primitivism, including going naked through marketplaces and even into churches, as witnesses of their devotion to the “naked truth.” As late as 1672, the only great Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay, went “naked as a
sign through the chilly streets of Aberdeen.” Quakers railed against, and
denigrated, education and even went through a period of mysticism at
Emmanuel College in Cambridge, which had once been the seat of
Puritan intellectualism. Stained-glass windows were smashed at Oxford
and Cambridge, and altar decorations destroyed in the name of Puritan
and sectarian relevance (Baltzell, 1979, p. 83).

Whereas Puritanism was centered in the most sophisticated and pros­
perous parts of England—East Anglia, London, and even the garment­
producing towns in the north such as Leeds and Bradford—Quakerism
took root in the lonely fens and dales of the north country, the most back­
ward, least educated, most royalist, Roman Catholic and still feudal part of
the nation. It was an appeal to the heart rather than the mind. In striking
contrast to the highly educated, theologically sophisticated builders of both
Calvinism and Puritanism, the founder of Quakerism, George Fox, was the
son of a humble weaver in a small Lancashire village and almost entirely
self-educated. Fox was a charismatic mystic whom many have called the
only religious genius of the English Reformation (Baltzell, 1979, p. 84).

Quakers date their founding to Fox’s vision on Pendle Hill in
Lancashire in the spring of 1652. The Quakers were zealous missionaries
and sought converts all over Britain, Europe, the Near East, and the New
World, all within a decade of Fox’s vision.

First-generation Quakers were a hardy, fanatical, and apocalyptical
band of martyrs who were hated, hunted down, imprisoned, tortured,
and hanged for their convictions. Puritan England was not a permissive
age. The Quaker “Female Friends of Truth” had a particular affinity for
fanaticism and martyrdom (Baltzell, 1979, p. 85). In November 1655, in
the face of increasing anarchy, Cromwell set up a military dictatorship.
Tolerance declined and the persecution of Quakers increased. In January
1656, Fox was sent to prison (p. 87).

Quakers saw no need for an elite composed of magistrates and minis­
ters, or any kind of church hierarchy, since God’s authority was to be found
through the promptings of the Inner Light. Nor would there be a need for
government, or war, if all men followed the Sermon on the Mount. In accord
with this perfectionist set of values, Quakers tended to withdraw from both
government responsibility and participation in war (Baltzell, 1979, p. 92).

In the seventeenth century, the area that is the present-day northern
part of the West Midlands, from Cheshire in the west, to the north through
Lancashire, and east to Yorkshire and Humberside counties, was called
the North Country. This was a distinct historical area since it was the scene
of the Lancashire royalty wars among contenders for the throne and, in
the mists of time, the site of Viking colonization. The largest group of
Quaker colonists (60 percent) that settled in Pennsylvania originated here.