

Road Through a Home: A History of the Bush River Quaker Settlement in Colonial South Carolina

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Abstract

A study of culture in colonial and early 19th century South Carolina offers valuable insight into the lives and practices that defined the various groups of the colony, and how these groups were impacted by the development of the new nation. This paper will answer the question of how the intersections between Quaker and South Carolinian culture affected the Quaker communities, culture, and faith in Bush River. Completing a study of the Bush River Quaker community and the larger South Carolinian community, will show how transatlantic migration transformed the original principles of settlers into something new and “American”. Quakers in colonial South Carolina are the focus of this paper because they kept detailed records and maintained a large correspondence network between the other Quaker communities in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. My paper will rely on primary texts, such as the meeting minutes of the Bush River Quakers, for information on the South Carolinian and Quaker cultures. I will also utilize secondary sources, such as *George Fox and Early Quaker Culture* and *Unification of a Slave State*, for analysis. The goal of this paper is to show that when the Quakers migrated to colonial South Carolina, the colony’s dependence on slave labor divided, and then caused the relocation of, the Bush River Quakers.

Keywords: Quakers, antislavery, migration

1. Introduction

Who are the Quakers? And what beliefs distinguish them so greatly from other Christians? The Society of Friends, or Quakers, began in Northwest England in 1652.¹ Other Christians saw Quakers as blasphemous and diabolically inspired because their practices were so different from those of other Protestants.² The term “Quakers” was actually the nickname given to Friends because of how they shook during worship.³ Quaker doctrine is centered on a person’s inner light of Christ. Quakers believed in a direct inward connection to Christ, which allowed for salvation on an individual level.⁴ Quaker theology is based on four key points. First, direct inward encounters with God and revelation are central. Second, church business was based on the ideas of direct communal guidance. Third, everyone was spiritually equal and there existed “the priesthood of all believers.” Fourth, Quakers preferred peace and pacifism over war, and they committed to other forms of social witness.⁵ These principles translated to a distinctive culture that reflected their religious beliefs.

Quakers did not believe in the need for churches or outward sacraments. Instead they believed every day was equally holy and they chose to ignore the traditional church calendar and its holidays, such as Christmas and Easter.⁶ Similarly, Quakers chose to ignore the authority of the state when its policies conflicted with their faith.⁷ Early Quaker ministries first spread to the rest of Britain, Scotland, and Wales, then on to Barbados and the mainland American colonies. All throughout the Atlantic world, the Quaker doctrine and public practices of its members conflicted with

prevailing religious and political practices and ideology. In the 17th century, Quakers continuously migrated seeking to spread their faith, to create new Quaker communities, and to escape persecution.

This paper chronicles the duration of the Bush River Quaker settlement in South Carolina, from the 1750s until 1808. It explores the Quaker motives for migration into and out of the colony, and the conflicts that existed between the Quakers and the rest of the colony. This paper seeks to answer the question: to what extent did living in colonial and early national South Carolina affect the Bush River Quaker community, culture, and faith? And, to what extent is this case studies emblematic of the development of the Quaker antislavery position in the Atlantic World?

2. Settlement in South Carolina

Historically the Bush River Monthly Meeting is listed as one of the four principal centers of Quakerism in South Carolina,⁸ and recorded as one of the largest and strongest meetings of Quakers on the North American continent.⁹ The Bush River Quakers were one of a number of Quaker Meetings that were a part of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting. Bush River Quakers regularly corresponded the other smaller Meetings with the North Carolina Yearly Meeting, such as the Crane Creek Meeting. At its height, a Bush River Quarterly Meeting drew around 500 members in attendance.¹⁰ The specific date for the establishment of the Bush River settlement in Newberry County, South Carolina is not available, however it is clear that there were residents in the area by the 1750s, as settlers pushed deeper into the backcountry of South Carolina.¹¹ The settlement extended for about 3 to 4 miles on each side of the Bush River and was made up of mostly small farms.¹²

Quakers were attracted to South Carolina because of the colony's religious freedom and tolerance, and its economic opportunity. The Carolina territory was established as a colony in 1670. The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina (1669) guided the early vision and development of the colony. These laws never came to govern either of the Carolinas - neither before nor after they formally divided into North and South Carolina in 1729 - but nonetheless they left a significant mark on the history of South Carolina.¹³ The Fundamental Constitutions facilitated religious pluralism (and thus religious tolerance) in the colony because they did not require that settlers practice a specific faith.¹⁴ This component of the Constitutions was meant to increase settlement of the colony, attracting various religious practitioners. The South Carolina colonial government drew on this idea from the Fundamental Constitutions when they created the political structure of the colony to continue attracting settlers. Numerous denominations of Christians, and even Jews, co-inhabited the colony.¹⁵ Some Friends migrated across the Atlantic from England, Barbados, and Ireland. Others migrated from other North American colonies namely, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina.

Meeting minutes of the Bush River Monthly Meeting began in 1772 and continued until 1820. Surviving meeting minutes and other records of the Bush River Meeting speak to the dedication of this community of Quakers to their faith and its principles. These Quakers did their best to adhere to the teachings of the Quaker Church, especially when it came to the Church position on slavery. Meeting minutes also document the disownment of Quakers for not upholding core practices. Together, the remaining records reveal how the evolution of the Quaker antislavery position affected the Bush River Quakers.

Bush River Quakers reprimanded their members for not acting in accordance with Quaker doctrine. Missing meetings, swearing oaths, and cursing, among many other things, warranted a public admittance of misconduct. Mary Addinton of Bush River, for example, provided "a paper of condemnation for this meeting condemning her misconduct for which this meeting takes as satisfaction."¹⁶ When Friends did not make amends in a satisfactory manner, they were disowned by the Meeting. This was the case for William Bridges, who "did not appear to them to be in a suitable disposition to make satisfaction... this Meeting hereby disown(ed) him the said William Bridges from being a member of our Society until he comes to a just sense of his misconduct so as suitably to condemn the same."¹⁷ The minutes also cite excessive taking up arms as a predominant reason for disownment in Bush River.

As part of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting, the Bush River Monthly Meeting followed their instructions on the buying, selling, and hiring of slaves. In 1768, the North Carolina Yearly Meeting declared that slave trading, as a business, was forbidden and Friends were "to be careful not to buy or sell in any case that can be reasonably avoided."¹⁸ In 1772, the North Carolina Yearly Meeting again advised Quakers not to deal in slaves, however the Meeting allowed the buying and selling of slaves exclusively between Friends. They believed this was beneficial for slaves, assuring they would have less harsh masters and assuring slave families would remain intact. Noncompliance with these declarations initially did not result in any punishment, until 1781 when the North Carolina Yearly Meeting made slavery a disownable offense.¹⁹

The dependence on slave labor was a foundational part of South Carolina's development and culture. The colony had the most rigid slave codes to ensure the success of its slave society. The Fundamental Constitutions featured extensive regulations on slavery and granted white South Carolinian masters total control over their slaves. According to the Constitutions, "Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his Negro slaves..."²⁰ In 1691, South Carolina passed the "Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves" which introduced increased policing of slaves.²¹ These laws enforced and maintained the supremacy of a small population of whites, who were heavily outnumbered by blacks. South Carolina's slave laws were created with the fear of domestic and overseas slave rebellions in mind. Throughout the end of the 17th century South Carolina received news of slave revolts in Jamaica, Antigua, and Barbados.²² On Sunday September 9th, 1739 around two dozen slaves assembled near the Stono River, just a few miles from Charleston. The group killed more than twenty settlers and set several buildings ablaze before colonial militia stopped them. The Stono Rebellion prompted the South Carolina assembly to pass the Negro Act of 1740, prohibiting slaves from learning how to read and write. Slave literacy was seen as partially responsible for the rebellion and thus it was a threat to the colony.²³

By 1768, in some coastal districts a slave majority outnumbered whites seven or eight to one.²⁴ By 1800, slaves made up 84 percent of the population in the lowcountry region (excluding the city of Charleston), and a third of the population in the lower backcountry.²⁵ As part of their extensive slave restrictions, South Carolina also legally prohibited manumission.²⁶ The South Carolina Act Respecting Slaves, Free Negroes, Mulattoes, and Mestizoes passed in 1800, required the testimony of five local freeholders - verifying that slaves were of "good character" and capable of providing for themselves - for the approval of a slave's manumission.²⁷ The Act also strengthened the slave patrol system, and it prohibited the congregation of both free blacks and slaves, whether or not whites were present.²⁸ Slaveholders worried about the threat freed blacks posed to their power and safety. These laws meant Bush River Quakers, and anyone interested in manumitting their slaves, could not do so without legal difficulties. The antislavery position of the Society of Friends and the legal protections of slavery presented a major conundrum for Quakers throughout South Carolina. Many, though not all, Bush River Quakers worked through the North Carolina Yearly Meeting to help slaves escape bondage through three specific methods. The North Carolina Yearly Meeting accepted slaves from individuals desiring to free their slaves they then: transported the slaves northward to free territory; transported them to colonies in Western Africa or Haiti; or provided them with good places to live and work in North Carolina with some semblance of freedom.²⁹

Not all who looked upon the face of slavery were moved to condemn it. Many saw no contradiction with having slaves and being a Quaker. One such Quaker was Samuel Kelly, who inherited an enslaved man named Ben.³⁰ Some slaveholding Quakers of Bush River treated their slaves with kindness and saw such benign treatment as justification to keep their slaves. They believed that because they were not cruel to their slaves and amply provided for them, unlike non-Quaker masters, they were still good Quakers. This belief was supported by the early position of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting. Some Quakers also interpreted the Epistles against slavery as advisory and not strict prohibitions because early declarations against slavery carried no penalty. Slaveholding Quakers who wanted to emancipate their slaves again faced legal difficulties, so some felt it easier to keep their slaves. And of course, there were those who believed blacks were indeed inferior.

Additionally, one should not conflate the antislavery position of Quakers and their position on equality. In 1748, the London Yearly Meeting discussed the atrocities of slavery and found that the "trade is destructive to the welfare of the human society..."³¹ In 1792 the Quakers again petitioned the Commons of Great Britain in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.³² However, while Quakers called for the abolish of the slave trade and allowed, and even encouraged, blacks to attend their meetings, blacks were rarely accepted as a Quaker. One rare case was Abigail Franks. In 1781 the Birmingham, Pennsylvania, Monthly Meeting referred her application to the Yearly Meeting, inquiring whether her application should "be rejected on account of color." The committee appointed by the Yearly Meeting reported that Franks' disposition was good and "her color appeared to them not darker than some who are esteemed white," so on May 1784 Frank was accepted in the Society.³³ The racial prejudice amongst Quakers was due to the stigma of inferiority born out of slavery. Yes they opposed slavery, however they also tended to regard their relationship with blacks, both slave and free, as paternalistic. Not all Quakers harbored racial prejudice, but prejudice existed even alongside the antislavery sentiments of Quakers.³⁴

As the 18th century continued on, southern Quakers lived surrounded by a slave society that increasingly strengthened and legally, socially, and politically protected the institution.³⁵ Even the North had slavery during colonial times - the South, particularly South Carolina, had larger slave populations and had greater economic dependence on slavery than other colonies. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the expansion of cotton into the backcountry, and with it the expansion of slavery, led to the out-migration of many Quakers.³⁶ As time went on, the Bush River Quakers grew distressed by the immorality, illiteracy, irreligiousness, and downright cruelty of the

system of slavery. They recognized the violence, terrorism, and militarism necessary for the maintenance of the institution and they recognized that these directly contradicted the pacifist tenets of their faith.³⁷

For Bush River, the man that revolutionized the conversation on how detrimental slavery was to Quaker faith and practices, was itinerant Quaker minister Zachariah Dix, also Zachary Dicks. In 1803, Dix passed through South Carolina and visited Bush River. Dix was believed to have the gift of prophecy.³⁸ When he addressed the Bush River community he proclaimed,

“O Bush River, Bush River, how hath thy beauty faded away and gloomy darkness eclipsed thy day! ... my Master, whom I serve continually, hath sent me here with a little message of warning. For almost one half a century God has prospered you... Have not the recent winds from the south borne to us the awful curse in the massacre of San Domingo, telling the tragic story of human slavery?... God made of one blood all the races of the Earth... But, O Bush River, there are those of the number who have forsaken the God of their fathers!... You are depriving your fellow men of their God-given rights. You have bought them like cattle in the pen; you have sold them like sheep at the slaughter. You have counted them among your assets; you have listed them as your property, the same as your cotton and your corn. There are those within the sound of my voice, to whom conscience has been saying, lo these many years, in the language of the prophet of old, ‘Under the heavy burdens, break free every chain and let the oppressed go free.’”³⁹

Dix’s prophecy was partially inspired by the events of the Haitian Revolution. In the 1790s, the Haitian Revolution was a major cause of fear in the United States and southerners especially were concerned that blacks might be influenced by the events in the Caribbean.⁴⁰ Because the United States was also dependent on slave labor, Dix foresaw impending catastrophe in the United States as well.⁴¹ He “prophesied” the eventual abandonment of the Bush River Quaker Meeting and later on, the American Civil War. Despite the fact that Bush River was located in the backcountry and the slave population did not outnumber whites, by 1800 planters began bringing more slaves into the region.⁴² Slave rebellions - real or rumored, domestic or overseas, successful or failed - instilled fear into the Bush River Quakers. The threat of slave revolts generated fear that Quakers could be hurt in a revolt or forced to violate their pacifist principles to help put down an uprising. And living in the midst of such violence and social chaos would be unfavorable, even if they weren’t hurt or forced to take up arms.⁴³

Again, the antislavery ideology and efforts of Quakers did not equate to a belief in racial equality, and as such their racial prejudices fueled their fears of slave insurrections. The climate of fear generated by real and fictitious slave revolts propelled Quaker migration from the South to the Northwest Territory.⁴⁴ Returning to Dix’s prophecy, he stressed not only the contradiction and ungodliness of living in a slavery society, among such inhumane practices; he also legitimized the fear of slave revolts by showing how they could affect the Bush River community. At a time when the Bush River Monthly Meeting debated remaining in South Carolina, Dix’s prophecy served as a catalyst for westward migration for many Quakers. Many Bush River Quakers sold their farms, abandoned their slaves or sold them to the North Carolina Yearly Meeting, loaded their essential goods on wagons, and headed to Ohio to join many other southern Friends in escaping the plight of slavery.⁴⁵

Between 1802 and 1807, there was a mass exodus of Bush River Quakers, who departed from South Carolina to Ohio in the Northwest Territory.⁴⁶ The Bush River Meeting was formally put down in 1822; however, the majority of its members had left by 1808.⁴⁷ The cause of Bush River’s demise was not a series of recurring issues. The end of the Bush River Monthly Meeting resulted from the growing contention between southern slavery and the Quaker antislavery position. Members of the Bush River community made the decision to relocate to Ohio, where a budding community of Quakers lived free from the horrors of slavery.

3. Conclusion

Despite sharing a similar heritage and religious identity, living in different environments inevitably affected the outcome of Quaker culture, shaping their antislavery views. The influence of Quakers from Barbados, the West Indies, and the South ensured that a strong pro-slavery element remained rooted in the Society of Friends for a long time.⁴⁸ The Quaker position on slavery was thus gradual and fraught with deliberation and conflict. The Bush River Quakers, though slow to develop their antislavery position, they nonetheless made a firm stance against living alongside such an inhumane institution by migrating out to the Northwest Territory.

The challenge slavery presented to the Bush River Quakers was a microcosm of the challenge slavery presented to the entire Society of Friends, particularly southern Friends.⁴⁹ The early 1800s saw the departure of tens of thousands of Quakers from the southern states of South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia and North Carolina. This exodus from the South to the Northwest became known as the “Great Migration” in Quaker literature due to its size and impact on the

Society of Friends in America.⁵⁰ Quakers fled the South seeking an escape from slavery – more specifically, from slave revolts. Some, less concerned with slavery, fled looking for new economic opportunity.⁵¹

The story of Bush River outlines the slow development of the Quaker antislavery position. It speaks to the expansion of slavery in South Carolina, and its increased legal protection. Many Quakers who migrated to South Carolina went seeking a faithful community and religious toleration. But they lived surrounded by a society that had contradicting values and institutions: a culture dependent on the violent suppression and exploitation of slaves. Ultimately many Quakers left South Carolina because tolerant or not, their faith and their communities were in direct opposition to the harsh slave system surrounding them.

4. Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor Professor Benjamin Carp, my mentor Professor Lauren Mancia, and my honors thesis course classmates – especially Lisa Del Sol – all of whom read drafts, gave suggestions, and above all provided encouragement and support to complete my project. I would also like to thank Gwen Erickson, librarian and archivist at the Guilford College Library, who helped me find the Bush River Meeting Minutes and other crucial material.

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