Settlement: The Origins and Legacy of the Pennsylvania Quakers

By Barry Levy, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.31.16
Word Count 1,033

The Quakers were a group of religious believers who formed in England. Their ideas and beliefs spread in North America. Many of these have become part of the American culture we know today.

In 1649, a 10-year civil war ended in England. The Puritan Christians won and put King Charles I on trial. He was found guilty and killed. Kings and queens were done away with for a time. Most English had belonged to the Anglican Church. Then Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan ruler, took over England and declared that people should listen to sermons by trained ministers. Only then could English people understand what Jesus Christ did for them.
Many Puritans lived far north from the cities and had no trained ministers. George Fox and Margaret Fell lived in the north and believed that people did not need ministers. They taught that the Holy Spirit of Christ was born into every person. So, all people, they believed, could have the light of Christ inside them. These people became frustrated with the Puritan rulers, and so they started the Quakers.

**Quakers simply gathered quietly**

There were no difficult sermons and no big churches. Northern Quakers found Christ privately. The Quaker form of worship was just a meeting of people who sat in silence. They quietly felt the Holy Spirit or the Light spread among the group. They called themselves Friends or Children of Light. Sometimes a person would suddenly speak. The words were not always easy to understand. Sometimes the person would shake. Non-believers began calling them Quakers. They did not mind being called Quakers because the words of non-Quakers could not bother them.

Quakers believed they were reborn from the inside by the Holy Spirit. They had very different ideas that bothered other people. They thought that once a person was alive with the Light or Holy Spirit, he or she became the Word of God. In following the Word of God, Quakers could never lie. When they sold goods at the market, they refused to bargain. They set a fixed price, just as stores do today. At the time, it was a strange, new idea.

The Quakers decided that men and women both shared God's Word. The Quakers were the first religious group to have female ministers.

**The invention of the handshake**

Quakers refused to bow or tip their hats to others. Instead, upon meeting someone, a Quaker grabbed the person's hand to feel the Light of the other person. That is how the handshake was invented. The Quakers used plain and simple words, so their clothes and buildings were plain and simple, too. Anything fancy was sinful.

About two years after the death of Oliver Cromwell, the army brought King Charles II back to England in 1660. The English people were mostly Anglicans and did not like the religious, plain Puritan way of life. Many blamed this on the Quakers. Laws were passed and 11,000 Quakers were sent to jail over 40 years.

**Wheat farming was successful for many families**

While just being a Quaker was against the law, they continued to change society and the family.
Quakers were gentle parents and did not punish their children. Quakers did not follow the common English habit of sending children off to work at age 14. In England, Quakers started big companies like Barclays and Lloyd’s Bank, Cadbury chocolate company, and many metal-producing businesses.

To avoid being jailed in England, many northern Quakers left for America. They got cheap land in the Delaware Valley where they planted and sold wheat. Many became rich in America. Quakers were only a tiny percentage of the English population in America. But thanks to William Penn, a rich Quaker, they had a welcoming place to live in the colony of Pennsylvania. Charles II, King of England, gave the land to Penn. The Quakers created large farms. Quaker families ruled the colony by controlling the powerful Pennsylvania Assembly and built a great city in Philadelphia. They were a religious, peaceful people.

**Friendships with Native Americans turn ugly**

Pennsylvania became “the best poor man’s country” as America attracted European workers. Despite all this success, the Quakers could not share power with these new groups. In the beginning, William Penn and the Quakers treated the Native Americans well. However, the Quaker families started taking more land and new people coming from Europe wanted their own farms.

In 1756, the Delaware tribe attacked the colonists. Some colonists wanted to fight and others said fighting was against the Quaker religion. The situation became worse with the coming of the American Revolution. Many Quakers were against war and they did not fight. Many people decided not to be Quakers anymore.

Americans began moving west. The Quaker silent meetings and beliefs about family life were not as popular with the Western pioneers. Instead, they followed Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist preachers who were more energetic. The Quakers split into two groups. One group began preaching and the other group kept the old ways of the silent meeting. Quakers who did move west did not want to fight Native Americans.

**Quakers' new thinking became models for everyone**

The Quaker family became a model for a gentler American family and home life. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and Louisa May Alcott’s "Work: A Story of Experience" describe the idea of the perfect Quaker family.

The anti-war and anti-slavery idea of the Quakers became very popular in New England. Quaker women like Jane Addams and Susan B. Anthony were leaders in the struggle for a woman’s right to vote. American Presidents Herbert Hoover and Richard M. Nixon were Quakers.
Quakers brought new thinking to the world, and eventually, these ideas became part of everyday life. Women should be equal to men. It is good to accept different religions. Slavery is evil and had to end. A handshake is a better greeting than a low bow or a curtsy. War should be avoided.

All these ideas were strange and new at the time. Thanks to the Quakers, they are accepted as ordinary today.

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Quiz

1. Which paragraph in the introduction [paragraphs 1-3] explains why the Quaker religion began?

2. Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that Quakers preferred things to be plain and simple?
   (A) There were no difficult sermons and no big churches.
   (B) They had very different ideas that bothered other people.
   (C) Quakers did not follow the common English habit of sending children off to work at age 14.
   (D) Quaker families ruled the colony by controlling the powerful Pennsylvania Assembly and built a great city in Philadelphia.

3. Read the section "Wheat farming was successful for many families." Why did many Quakers move from England to America?
   (A) because being a Quaker became illegal in England
   (B) because there was more farmland available in America
   (C) because other Quakers were becoming rich in America
   (D) because their businesses were not doing well in England

4. Read the section "Friendships with Native Americans turn ugly." What effect did conflict with Native Americans have on the Quaker religion?
   (A) Many Quakers decided to fight the Native Americans.
   (B) Many Quakers decided to move west to continue preaching.
   (C) The Quaker religion grew because people wanted to be more peaceful.
   (D) The Quaker religion shrunk because many members decided to leave it.
Answer Key

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Paragraph 2:
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