



## HISTORY OF OLD KENNETT MEETING

The Kennett Meeting House, now known as "Old Kennett," was first constructed in 1710 on land owned by Ezekiel Harlan probably as a temporary log structure. It is believed to have been enlarged in 1717 and replaced by the present fieldstone building in 1731. The Meeting House measures about 36 by 60 feet. Originally, it had huge chimneys incorporated into the gable ends with fireplaces at ground level. At an early date these were removed to the loft to accommodate the galleries which are supported by huge turned columns, and iron plate stoves provided heat. The doors which are presently in the east and west walls were once paired at the center front. It would seem that the large thirty-light windows were also later additions. There are indications that the splined wide oak board floor was lowered about two feet when the galleries were added.

Kennett Meeting was established by English and Irish Quakers who fled from religious persecution in their homelands and bought land from William Penn. By 1700 Kennett and Marlborough Townships were being colonized by these farming families. Initially, they gathered in one another's homes for customary Meetings for Worship twice a week, during which, as today they would sit in quiet meditation broken only when a member felt

compelled to rise to share some insight. According to the teachings of George Fox, who founded the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in 1647, no minister was needed to intercede between man and God, and no predetermined order of service or prepared prayers were used.

Kennett Friends joined members of New Castle Meeting, New Ark Meeting (located near Rockland, Delaware), and Centre meeting (near Centerville, Del.) for Meeting for Business every four or six weeks when questions of discipline were discussed. The men dealt with matters such as correction of members who had erred by perhaps speaking disparagingly of the Society or by consistent intemperance. The women, meeting separately, concerned themselves with impending marriages and the consideration of the cases of young ladies who married under the care of a minister or priest. Wooden shutters which separated the meeting rooms for these meetings could be open for general discussions. Women were allowed to take concerns to the men's meeting but were given no role in decision making before 1840. In minutes of 1713 we read that two women were appointed overseers to Kennett "to see that things are kept in good order." Was this job administrative or custodial?

Quakers were the controlling factor in politics in early Pennsylvania. They made up the majority of the assembly and hoped to build the province on Quaker principles. One of these was the Peace Testimony which prevented Friends from bearing arms against any man, based on the belief that there is that of God in every man. During the French and Indian War, 1754-1763, the Quakers could not support the English actions and felt compelled to leave their seats in the assembly. Thereafter, Friends never regained a strong political position.

An official attitude of neutrality was adopted in the revolution, but it was in the cemetery adjoining Kennett Meeting House that the first shots of the Battle of the Brandywine were fired. Before daybreak on September 11, 1777, an American light infantry corps led by General Maxwell was sent from the encampment at Chadd's Ford to delay the approach of the British force. Those troops, 5,000 strong and composed of Hessians and Highlanders as well as British soldiers, had left Kennett that morning and were surprised and sent into confusion by gunfire from behind the stone wall which surrounded the cemetery at that time. However, they were able to rally and drove General Maxwell's small force back to Chadd's Ford. Legend says that a hole in a loft windowpane in the Meeting House was made by a bullet that morning, and that soldiers killed in the great battle in the hills north of Chadd's Ford that afternoon are buried in this graveyard.

Minutes of the women's meeting of that day say "but a few Friends met by Reason of the Army Passing along at the time of meeting but the few That met after a time of sitting together adjourned the Meeting to the 18th of this Month."

General Washington reportedly said "all these Chester Countians are Tories," but members of Meeting were disowned for actively joining either side or hiring substitutes and were disciplined for aiding the fighting men of either side by providing horses or food. However, on the 18th of September after the Battle of the Brandywine, it was recorded: "A concern arising in this meeting for ye distressed Inhabitants amongst us who have suffered by ye armies, therefore it is recommended to Friends in general to encourage Benevolence & Charity by distributing of their substance to such as they may think are in want."

During the nineteenth century the membership of Kennett Meeting suffered three divisions. The first occurred in 1812 when members who lived in the village of Kennett Square asked that they be allowed to form their own meeting.

In 1827 the Society of Friends split into conservative and liberal sects. The evangelical conservative sect believed in "original sin," scripture as the word of God, and the divinity of Jesus. The liberal group was labeled Hicksite after Elias Hicks, one of many Friends who rejected the theory that the human race had been tainted by the inheritance of Adam's sin. They also felt that Jesus and the Bible were but aids to understanding the "Light" within each man. Hicks' ministry appealed to those members who were questioning the evangelical turn that Fox's Quakerism had taken.

By 1827 there were two Yearly Meetings at Philadelphia, and by 1828 there were two Kennett Monthly Meetings. The Hicksites retained the Old Kennett Meeting House while the conservatives left to meet separately and built their own Meeting House on Parkersville Road which was used until 1904.

Friends had released their Negroes held as slaves before the Revolution and worked with anti-slavery groups to change the laws. They were active in aiding runaways via the "Underground Railway" and took responsibility for educating, clothing, housing, and giving religious instruction to freed blacks. Those who could not agree to holding public anti-slavery meetings in the Meeting House made "Progressive" Friends so impatient that they left to form their own meeting with some non-Friends to combat slavery, intemperance, and "other evils of society." The Progressive Friends built the Longwood Meeting House and were disowned until 1874.

Gradually, the membership of Old Kennett Meeting dwindled until in the early 1920's Meetings for Worship might have only one or two members sitting in the stillness of the ancient building. Since 1950 the "Old Kennett Committee" of Kennett Meeting (Kennett Square) has maintained the building, opening it for worship on the last Sunday of June, July, and August at 11 a.m. We welcome all who wish to share our worship service with us.