Richmond was originally settled by Quaker farmers who came up from North Carolina to find fertile land and social justice. Earlham History Professor and Archivist Thomas Hamm notes that, “Quakers had decided that slavery was an evil, sinful institution.” In journeying north, they first stopped in Ohio and then moved into eastern Indiana, settling here because of the water power and rich soil. Also, there was a treaty line to the east, which the Quakers felt should be respected. In the migration north, many well-known Quaker families including the Cox, Hoover and Smith families came to the Richmond area, attracting even more Quakers here. So many moved here that soon there were more Quakers in this region than anywhere else in the world. Soon, the Richmond area rivaled the Philadelphia area for influential Quakers and Quaker leadership.

Interestingly, even though they worked to end the injustices of slavery, the Quakers of the time largely sought to be a community apart from others. They did not want to engage the world very much for fear that they would become corrupted by external influences. They acted as witnesses for the world, but not people of the world. As a result of this and a need for better education, the Quakers established Earlham Boarding School in 1847 to provide a guarded education. While the original purpose was to protect the area’s Quaker youth from outside influences, the school later became Earlham College and in 1865 began to enroll to non-Quaker students, as well. This change more fully exposed area Quakers to the outside world.

With the tragedy of World War I, many Quakers in this area were awakened to the need for global social action. They realized that they could no longer be only witnesses for the world, but that they also had to engage with the world around them. Since then Quakers from the area have been prominent in the world as agents working for social justice and peace.

As a result of the strong Quaker influence in this area and the organizations present here (such as the headquarters for Friends United Meeting, Earlham School of Religion, Quaker Hill Conference Center, and Earlham College), Richmond “is a crossroads for Quakers around the world.” Not only do many Quakers pass through Richmond, but there are a large number of Quakers living in the area, as well. The ratio of Quakers to the overall population may be higher here than anywhere else in the U.S. Many Quaker leaders throughout the world have graduated from Earlham School of Religion and Earlham College.