

Resistance to Anti-Slavery Friends in Indiana

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Quakers, or members of the Society of Friends, are known for their position on the “right side” of history. They have been strong proponents of women’s rights, were actively involved in participating and training participants for the United States Civil Rights struggle, and, perhaps most famously, were early leaders of the abolitionist movement. Quakers have a long and fruitful history in the abolition movement, and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was the first large religious body to condemn the system of slavery.⁵⁰ As early as 1775, almost a century before Congress passed the 13th Amendment and abolished slavery in the United States, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting banned its members from owning slaves, with threats of disownment if the members failed to comply.⁵¹ However, anti-slavery ideas and approaches were far from ubiquitous. For some, the answer to the problem of slavery lay in the care and Christianization of slaves; for others, a desire to free them and "return" them to Africa known as colonization. Even as bodies of Quakers began calling for an end to slavery, the approved means of

⁵⁰ Dan Kilbride, “Quakers Living in the Lion’s Mouth: The Society of Friends in Northern Virginia, 1730-1865,” review of *Quakers Living in the Lion’s Mouth: The Society of Friends in Northern Virginia, 1730-1865* by Glenn Crothers, *New Books in History*, August 27, 2013, <http://newbooksinhistory.com/crossposts/a-glenn-crothers-quakers-living-in-the-lions-mouth-university-press-of-florida-2012/>.

⁵¹ Pamela Moore, “Quakers and Slavery— History Tour, Old City, Philadelphia,” Archer Street Friends, *accessed October 29, 2013*, accessed on <http://www.archstreetfriends.org/tour>.

accomplishing emancipation differed greatly. Many corporate groups of Friends advocated for moderate responses to slavery and pushed back when other Friends took a more aggressive route. In the case of the Indiana Yearly Meeting, Anti-slavery Friends ran into resistance from Friends who had become ideologically and economically entrenched in the very system they so passionately argued against. These Friends encountered a conflict of interest on the part of those who stood to lose financially and socially from immediate and all-encompassing emancipation.

Even before the 1770s, many individual Friends were pursuing the cause of abolition. According to Walter Edgerton, during this time period "Active, zealous, and faithful Friends were found in all the Yearly Meetings: and although these met with much opposition from individuals, yet I apprehend but few meetings interposed a barrier to their labors"⁵² Soon, however, Quaker bodies shifted from tolerating individual action to collectively advocating for emancipation. By the 1830s, Indiana Yearly Meeting began to publicly promote parts of the abolitionist agenda. In the early 1830s, the Yearly Meeting protested discriminatory bills on the floor of the Indiana State Legislature,⁵³ and by the mid-1830s was allowing the Committee on the Concerns of the People of Color to publish

⁵² Walter Edgerton, *A history of the separation in Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends : which took place in the winter of 1842 and 1843, on the anti-slavery question : containing a brief account of the rise, spread, and final adoption by the Society, of its testimony against slavery : together with a record of some of the principal facts and circumstances relating to that separation : embracing the documents issued by both parties relative thereto : and some account of the action of other Yearly Meetings of Friends, touching the controversy, especially that of London, etc.* (Cincinnati: A Pugh, 1856), 21.

⁵³ Ryan Jordan, "The Indiana Separation of 1842 and the Limits of Quaker Anti-Slavery", *Quaker History* Volume 89, No 1, Spring 2001, 8.

condemnation of Quaker involvement in colonization societies. The advices⁵⁴ further demonstrated that Quakers were alone among American religious bodies in allowing open condemnations of colonization, which James Birney called "an opiate to the consciences" of those who would otherwise "feel deeply and keenly the sin of slavery"⁵⁵, and open support for immediatism.⁵⁶ The 1838 advice of Indiana Yearly Meeting, for example, declared that Friends "cannot say to [the slave] he must go to Haiti or Liberia ... to entitle him to the full enjoyment of his freedom." Beyond clearly breaking with colonizationists, they also stated that "liberty . . . [is] the right of all" and believed slavery should not be "prolonged for a single day."⁵⁷ During this period, Indiana Friends were resoundingly behind the Anti-slavery cause.

The place of vocal abolitionism, however, changed rapidly between 1838 and 1842. Beginning in 1836, various groups, often religious, began to form Anti-slavery societies. By the early 1840s, there were Anti-slavery societies in Wayne,

⁵⁴ Advices, a common publication amongst Quakers, are statements of ideals that act as reminders of the "basic faith and principles held to be essential to the life and witness of Friends." Found on "Glossary of Quaker Terms and Concepts," *New York Yearly Meeting*, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.nyym.org/?q=glossary>.

⁵⁵ James G Birney, "Letter on Colonialization Addressed to the Rev. Thorton J. Mills, Corresponding Secretary of the Kentucky Colonization Society", (New York: Office of Anti-Slavery Reporter, 1834), accessed on http://www.lincolngroup.org/documents/fierytrial/Letter_on_colonization.pdf.

⁵⁶ Thomas Hamm, "On Home Colonization' by Elijah Coffin" *Slavery and Abolition* (September, 1984), 154-155.

⁵⁷ Jordan, "The Indiana Separation of 1842 and the Limits of Quaker Anti-Slavery", 8

Hamilton, Henry, Morgan, Madison, and Jefferson Counties.⁵⁸ Until 1839, however, they remained scattered and separated mostly along denominational lines. It was the arrival of Arnold Buffum, sent by the American Anti-Slavery Society, that set the wider organization of Anti-Slavery activists in Indiana in motion. Buffum was a controversial figure in Quakerism. After a series of failed business ventures, he declared bankruptcy, which resulted in his disownment.⁵⁹ However, Buffum still worked extensively with Quakers in the organization of the Anti-Slavery Society. Under his leadership, the Indiana Anti-Slavery Society established a headquarter in Newport and ran candidates on the Liberty Party ticket.⁶⁰ During his time in Indiana, Buffum also forged a friendship with another disowned Friend, Hiram Mendenhall.

Hiram Mendenhall proved to be a central figure in the clash about to take place in Indiana Yearly Meeting. In the fall of 1842, Mendenhall presented the presidential candidate Henry Clay, who was speaking in Richmond, Indiana, with a petition bearing around 2000 signatures demanding that Clay free his slaves. Elijah Coffin, the Clerk of Indiana Yearly Meeting, immediately assured Clay that the Yearly Meeting had not authorized the petition. Afterwards, Indiana Yearly Meeting declared that although the individuals who presented the

⁵⁸ Christopher David Walker, "The Fugitive Slave Law, Antislavery and the Emergence of the Republican Party in Indiana" (PhD dissertation, Purdue University, 2013), 90.

⁵⁹ It might seem counterintuitive that Quakers would disown members simply for declaring bankruptcy, but the discharging of debt contradicts the Quaker testimony of integrity. For more information about Quaker testimonies, see *The Quakers* by Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1988), 41-47. More on Arnold Buffum can be found in Thomas D. Hamm's *God's Government Begun: The Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform, 1842-1846* (Indiana University Press, 1995), 53.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

manumission petition to Clay "appeared[ed] to be Friends" they "were not actuated with a sincere love of the gospel."⁶¹ This public disavowal was soon followed with removal of the "troublemakers" who had drafted and presented the Henry Clay petition from offices within the Yearly Meeting. Additionally, the Yearly Meeting warned the monthly meetings within their fold to "be careful" of whom they appointed to committees, clerkships, and other influential positions to avoid appointing people who had disregarded advices against using Quaker meetinghouses for "Anti-slavery" gatherings. The meeting also cautioned against the "excitement and overactive zeal" of the anti-slavery societies.⁶²

By 1843, the Anti-slavery Friends within Indiana Yearly Meetings had reached such a state of frustration that they removed themselves from the Yearly Meeting, forming their own in its stead. This frustration resulted from the antagonism that had grown within not just Indiana Yearly Meeting, but Yearly Meetings across the United States. In Baltimore, leading Friends advised abolitionists to take care in their involvement with the Anti-slavery moment, which could "be the means of bringing destruction upon others."⁶³ New England Yearly Meeting took an even stronger stance, warning they would disown Friends who continued to agitate about the issue of slavery or who hosted abolitionist lectures.⁶⁴

These advices all sprang from a common thread, which is exemplified by a prohibitory advice put out by the Meeting for Sufferings of Indiana Yearly Meeting in 1841. This document warns abolitionists to "wait for divine direction in such important concerns; lest if we overact the part called for at our hands, we

⁶¹ Ibid., 1-2.

⁶² Ibid., 14.

⁶³ Jordan, *Slavery and the Meetinghouse*, 43.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 44.

injure the righteous cause, and suffer loss ourselves." After stating the Society's commitment to the plight of slaves, it continues, "Thus maintaining our peaceable and Christian principles in unbroken harmony, we shall, we believe, be enable, as way may open, more availingly to plead the cause of this much-injured race of our fellow-men, and retain the place and influence which, as a Society, we have heretofore had with that rulers of our land."⁶⁵ Here, the writers quite stunningly bring forward a contradiction. One rationale they provide for moderation was a desire to maintain their "place and influence." The other was a desire to wait upon divine leadings. These two ideas do not seem contradictory in themselves; however, divine leadings had historically alienated Friends from privilege and influence instead of preserving them.⁶⁶ Between 1652 and 1689 approximately 15,000 Quakers, a third of the Quaker population in England, were prosecuted and imprisoned.⁶⁷ The most common charges were blasphemy, public speaking, refusal to swear oaths, and disturbing the peace.⁶⁸ These radical Friends, the predecessors of those opposed to Anti-slavery Friends, were clearly not divinely inspired to maintain their "place and influence."

⁶⁵ Edgerton, *A history of the separation in Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends*, 49.

⁶⁶ Joseph Besse provides an in depth look at some of the struggles early Friends encountered for following divine direction in his *A collection of the sufferings of the people called Quakers, for the testimony of a good conscience from the time of their being first distinguished by that name in the year 1650 to the time of the act commonly called the Act of toleration granted to Protestant dissenters in the first year of the reign of King William the Third and Queen Mary in the year 1689* (London: L. Hinde, 1753).

⁶⁷ "Prisoners of Conscious," *Quakers in Action*, accessed December 9, 2014, <http://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/44>.

⁶⁸ "Quakers Know Prisons from the Inside Out," *Friends Committee on National Legislation*, published November 28, 2011, accessed December 10, 2014, http://fcnl.org/issues/justice/quakers_know_prisons/.

Anti-slavery Friends in Indiana did not fail to take note of the contradictory nature of that proclamation. Charles Osborn, a prominent abolitionist, wrote this about the contemporary state of the Society:

The present is a time of deep trial to the Friends of *this most righteous cause* ; especially in our land. Most of our rulers, both in Church and State, are to be found uniting in, and helping to keep up, the popular outcry against Abolition ; some openly and undisguised, others put on much sanctimony, and profess to be Abolitionists and real friends of the slave, yet by their acts clearly demonstrate that they cherish more than a common 'lively *interest for the oppressor.*'

Here, Osborn takes a strong stance by conflating State and Church leaders' reactions. Both, he argues, favor the oppressors over the oppressed. Additionally, Osborn points to leaders who purportedly advocate for the oppressed slaves, but in actuality do little in their support. This breed, he argues, "love the praise of man more than the praise of God" and were responsible for the favorable position of slavery in the United states.⁶⁹ Taking a strong stance against slavery, after all, hardly won favor in Indiana. Henry Charles shared some of his experiences as an abolitionist in Indiana, such as "being sneered at for being an abolitionist and a Quaker" and "the jeers of some of the violent oppressors" that followed after an abolitionist meeting.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Edgerton, 68.

⁷⁰ Henry Charles, *Henry Charles to Sarah Thorn, 7th month 1st day, 1848*, letter, from the Indiana State Library.

Documents such as George Evan's *An Expostulate* shed light on exactly how conscious those within Indiana Yearly Meeting were of how abolitionist publications affected the way in which the community and the rest of the world viewed the yearly meeting.⁷¹

Arnold Buffum, similarly, noted the regard of human praise that was rising amongst Friends. He attributes Friends' lack of action against slavery to the "love of popular approbation in a sinful slave-holding nation." Thus, their desire of social approval negated their conscience, Quaker testimonies, and God's judgment.⁷² He, additionally, goes so far as to categorize those who do not take a strong stance against slavery as no longer Quaker, despite the fact that they "still use the language and wear the garb of Quakerism."⁷³ While Buffum seems stringent in his appraisal of those who opposed abolitionism within the Society of Friends, some Friends questioned the motivation of anti-Anti-Slavery Friends on an even deeper level.

Friends had done well for themselves economically in the Americas,⁷⁴ and this very economic success, Anti-slavery Friends argued, led to the opposition of prosperous Friends toward Abolitionism. During this time, most goods were

⁷¹ George Evans, *An Expostulation to Those Who Have Lately Seceded from the Religious Society of Friends*, letter, from Earlham College's Lilly Library Friends Collection, accessed [February 15](#), 2015.

⁷² A roughly contemporary work, *A System of Phrenology* by George Combe includes a section in which he explores the root and effect of "love for approbation" extensively.

⁷³ Edgerton, 27.

⁷⁴ Friends' commitment to fair dealings had imparted on them the reputation of good businessmen, which in turn facilitated high levels of success. From these factors rises the cliché (within Quakerism, at least) "Quakers came to the America to do good, and they did well."

transported over water. The Ohio River, which met up with the Mississippi River, made trading with New Orleans an influential port. That a city whose economy depended on slave labor could almost entirely govern the prices in Indiana's market⁷⁵ led some Friends to question the reasoning behind other Friends' apparent apathy to the Anti-Slavery cause. Writing a decade after the division of Indiana Yearly Meeting, Walter Edgerton declaimed that "If one wishes to encounter a bitter opponent of the Anti-Slavery movement, he had but to go to a Friend, a proprietor of a large manufacturing establishment, to be sure to find one. Friends, as well as others of the mercantile and manufacturing community, looked upon that movement as one calculated to deprive them of the means of amassing wealth."⁷⁶ Here Edgerton extends the complicity to slavery beyond actively owning slaves and into the realm of complementary industries.

Contemporary anti-slavery activists found wealthy Friends' relationships to slavery equally problematic. An early and important document published by the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends, which was formed in response to the aggressive actions against Anti-slavery Friends within Indiana Yearly Meeting, attributed the lack of substantive action of the part of the body of Friends to monetary desire:

The hand of cruel avarice became
afreshed nerved to its unholy grasp by the
prospect of extensive gain, through the
facilities offered by the invention of the
cotton gin. This prospect and desire of
gain was not confined to those

⁷⁵ Lee Burns, "The Ohio River, Its Influence on the Development of Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, June, 1923, <http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/imh/article/view/6284>.

⁷⁶ Edgerton, 39.

immediately engaged in holding slaves, but extended with lamentable effect to many of those in the Free states inclined to enter into mercantile or manufacturing operations. This class included a number of the most wealthy and influential in the Society of Friends, in the middle and eastern states, and the natural and consequent intercourse between them and the slaveholders of the south, had a direct tendency to leaven them into the same lordly, pompous, and intolerant feeling.⁷⁷

Here, not only financial gain but also interactions between slaveholders and Friends served to corrupt wealthy Friends. These wealthy Friends exerted significant influence over the policy of Indiana Yearly Meeting.

One Friend in that "class" was Elijah Coffin. At the time of the division in Indiana Yearly Meeting, Elijah Coffin had been serving as clerk of Indiana Yearly Meeting for over a decade.⁷⁸ Coffin was present for and responded to, both immediately and later in writing, the infamous Henry Clay incident. He and the other leaders of Indiana Yearly Meeting disavowed those Friends involved with the petition. Coffin vocally opposed "political abolition" in favor of colonization. His apparently racially based attitudes toward emancipation⁷⁹ reflected the dominant ideology

⁷⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁸ Harlow Lindley, "A Century of Indiana Yearly Meeting," *Bulletin of Friends' Historical Society of Philadelphia* 12, no. 1 (1923): 14.

⁷⁹ According to Ryan Jordan, Coffin feared racial amalgamation and approved to the United State government's reprehensible treatment of Native

of Northerners. As a wealthy man who functioned as first a teacher and farmer, then a shop owner and banker,⁸⁰ Coffin would have himself been entwined in slave goods. His callous desire to forcibly remove slaves upon emancipation⁸¹ provides an example of the "lamentable effect" of working within the slave system.

Coffin's involvement in banking sheds particular light upon his racialized attitude toward emancipation. In his book, Walter Johnson explains the intricate connectedness of Northern bankers, "factors", and cotton planters. According to Johnson, the "packet" system of shipping allowed cotton to be shipped at a low rate out of New York.⁸² Additionally, "New York's highly capitalized banks were able... to offer longer credit on better terms to those interested in buying cotton," which in turn balanced the extra distance traveled.⁸³ This system of lending formed the basis of the cotton market. Planters depended on the capital that moved from merchant-bankers, to merchants, to factors (a middleman), and finally to the planters who needed it to function between crops.⁸⁴ Thus, northerners, who would soon go to war under the pretense of eradicating slavery, acted to preserve the very system they purportedly abhorred in the interest of financial gain. While Coffin did not directly support slavery, his disavowal of Anti-slavery Friends implicated him in

Americans , The Indiana Separation of 1842 and the Limits of Quaker Anti-Slavery," 9.

⁸⁰ Katy Hestand, "Elijah Coffin," *History of Wayne County, Indiana II* (1884), accessed on <http://www.pasttracker.com/family/index.php/wayne-county-home/352-wayne-county-in/biographies/1302-elijah-coffin>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 258.

⁸³ Ibid., 257.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 258.

the perpetuation of slavery. His seemingly ambiguous social stance was consistent with his ambiguous economic position. Despite not owning slaves himself, Coffin was integrally, if indirectly, involved in the economic success of slavery during his twenty-four years of "able and faithful services"⁸⁵ to the banking industry.

That prominent Friends such as Elijah Coffin, who had attained positions of wealth and consideration in United States society, attempted to moderate their Anti-slavery brothers and sisters should, perhaps, come as no surprise. However, the impressive works of Quaker abolitionists such as Levi Coffin, a famous "conductor" in the Underground Railroad, John Woolman, an early proponent of emancipation, and John Greenleaf Whittier, an activist and poet, tend to overshadow this darker side of Friends history. However, it is just as important to study Friends' involvement in the development of solitary confinement as their work to alleviate the deplorable conditions of prisoners, Margaret Fell's harsh words to Amsterdam's Jews as Woolman's desire to learn from as well as teach Native Americans, and Quaker participants in and apologists for slavery as abolitionist leaders.

⁸⁵ "Elijah Coffin."

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