

THE STORY OF THE
BIRCH LAKE QUAKERS



FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE,
Near Birch Lake,
Calvin Twp., Cass Co., Michigan

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--- HOW IT ALL BEGAN ---

The Birch Lake Quakers were the spiritual descendants of 17th century members of the Religious Society of Friends who had been attracted to the New World by promise of religious freedom and economic opportunity. They first settled in colonies along the middle Atlantic seaboard and in New England. Later, many followed the frontier south into western Virginia, and some went on into western North and South Carolina and Georgia. Some seafaring New England Friends sailed to North Carolina, where they established plantations in coastal Perquamins County.

--- A PECULIAR INSTITUTION ---

Slaves were part of the labor force of colonial Quaker landowners and the slave trade a source of income for many New England Friends. But long before the 19th Century American abolition movement, Quaker consciences became tender in regard to the evils of slavery, so that first they gave up the slave trade and purchase of slaves, and, finally, by 1800 all Quakers, except those in Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia had manumitted their slaves.

Georgian and South Carolinian Quakers, not numerous, left almost in a body early in the 19th century for Tennessee and farther north. Virginians in the Society of Friends were clear of slavery by 1817. North Carolina Friends, as conscientious as their Northern counterparts, found themselves in a particularly intolerable situation. Manumission was illegal through a variety of devices, so that slaves they freed could be returned to slavery. In the face of this and of the difficulty of free labor competing with slave labor, great numbers, including many later to become the Birch Lake Quakers, left for free territory.

--- A LONG JOURNEY ---

How William East, born in North Carolina in 1773, and Rachel Talbot, born in 1780 near Winchester, Virginia, met we do not know. They were married when Rachel was seventeen, and settled in mountainous Grayson County, Virginia.

Rachel was a fifth-generation American Quaker, a great-great-grandchild of John Sharpless, who had left England in 1682 to take up land from William Penn. In order to attend meeting for worship over the border at Westfield, North Carolina she must have travelled on horseback across the Sauratown Mountains through what is still known as Quaker Gap. Then she took her membership to Mt. Pleasant, Va. Monthly Meeting which must have been nearer home.

In Grayson Co. were born Hannah, John, Joel, James and Polly East. But in 1809 Rachel asked for a certificate of transfer to Newberry Meeting, Tennessee. There, in Blount County, Susanna and Jacob were born. In 1815 William, himself, asked for membership at Newberry. In a few weeks, he and Rachel asked for a certificate to take to Whitewater Meeting, Indiana Territory. There in Wayne Co., Indiana were born Sallie, William H., Rebecca, Martha, and Isom.

In the meantime, another Quaker was on the move. Stephen Bogue, whose ancestors had come from Nantucket Island, Massachusetts to settle near Edenton, North Carolina, had left his family plantation in Perquamins Co. to settle in Preble Co., Ohio in 1811. In 1822 he married Elva Elliott of adjoining Wayne Co., Indiana. She died six years later, leaving a daughter Sarah.

The year that Stephen's wife died, 1828, his brother-in-law Charles Jones travelled to the St. Joseph Country in Michigan Territory, and returned to Preble Co. with favorable reports. When Charles and Anna Bogue Jones went to settle in Young's Prairie, Cass Co., in 1829, Stephen accompanied them. After buying a tract of land, he returned to Preble Co. where in 1831 he married a widow with a sixteen year old son. The widow's name was Hannah East Bonine, eldest child of William and Rachel East.

--- THE ST. JOSEPH COUNTRY ---

"Tis a spot, the best adapted of any to be seen, for the purpose of living as regards the soil . . . It is the richest district in all the country." (Memoir to the French Government, 1718.)

"Milton must have travelled in Michigan before he wrote the garden parts of Paradise Lost." (Harriet Martineau writing near White Pigeon Prairie, June, 1836.)

"The St. Joseph Country is a region that almost merits the lofty appellation of the Garden of America." (James Fenimore Cooper in Oak Openings, 1848.)

So said early travellers who visited the land of the Pottowatomies in the valley of the St. Joseph. The early settlers in Cass Co., along the St. Joseph's tributary, Christiann Creek, found a country covered by forest, interrupted here and there by oak openings and prairies, and dotted with sparkling little lakes. The first settlers took the choice prairie land or oak openings, which needed no extensive clearing, and where, once the sod was broken, the land was superior for farming. Later ones had to clear heavily wooded areas.

--- A FAMILY FINDS A HOME ---

When Stephen and Hannah Bogue came to Cass County in October, 1831, Hannah's twenty-year old brother Jacob East accompanied them.

A year later, in October, 1832, the White Pigeon Land Office granted a patent of 160 acres in Section I of Calvin Township to Joel East.

The following spring, 1833, Joel's father, William East, took up eighty acres and his brother James another 160 acres in Calvin, while John and Jacob East each took land in adjoining Porter, near Birch Lake. Either William, or one of his sons, raised a crop of corn and wheat on Young's Prairie that summer in preparation for a move.

William and Rachel East and their unmarried children Polly, Jacob, Sallie, William H., Rebecca, Martha, and Isom set out from Wayne County, Indiana in the fall of 1833. John and his bride and James, his wife and their four small children also were in the party. There were a horse and two ox teams pulling lumber wagons piled with household goods. They brought 18 hogs, 28 cattle, and 100 sheep. They must have stopped at White Pigeon Land Office, because on October 29, 1833 William took an additional 96 acres.

They arrived in Calvin on November 13, 1833 and lived in half-faced pole shanties until mid-winter, when their log cabins were ready. They survived that winter and the one which followed the June frost of 1835. This was the beginning of East Settlement.

--- A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY ---

First Quakers in Cass Co. held meeting for worship in the home of Stephen Bogue. Later they met in the home of William and Rachel East. Meantime other Friends had taken up land: Ishmael Lee, who married Sallie East; Josiah Osborn and his sons Ellison, who married Martha East, and Jefferson, who married Joel East's daughter Susanna; Isaac Bonine whose wife was Rachel East's sister; Lot Lundy whose daughter married William H. East; as well as Peter Marmon, Francis Sheldon, Lemuel Maulsby, and Zachariah Shugart.

A log meeting house was built for community worship in 1837. In 1841 Birch Lake Monthly Meeting was admitted to Northern Quarterly Meeting of Friends of Indiana Yearly Meeting. Francis Sheldon and Rachel East were the first clerks of the meeting.

Fifteen years later, in 1856, the present white frame meeting house was built on the site of the log building.

The land on which it was built was deeded in that year to the meeting by Joel and Sarah East. At the same time, James and Anna East deeded an Acre which apparently included the burying ground across from the Meeting House.

In 1846 an indulged meeting for worship of Birch Lake Meeting began to meet in the home of Isaac Bonine on Young's Prairie. After Prairie Grove built its own meeting house in 1848, monthly business meetings were held alternately at Penn and Birch Lake. It was out of this indulged meeting that Penn Friends Church grew.

--- "WHEN DOES THE SERVICE BEGIN?" ---

This proverbial question asked of an ancient Friend by a visitor to a silent meeting, received the proverbial reply, "When the meeting is over."

Cass Co. Friends, trying to remove themselves from the institution of slavery, were called to service. Their position near the border states and their reputation as a community of practicing Christians involved the community in the assistance of runaway slaves. The folklore of the Underground Railroad includes Cass County Quakers as conductors and their homes as way stations.

In 1847 a group of Kentucky slave owners came into Porter near the southeast corner of Calvin, left their wagons, and proceeded toward Josiah Osborn's farm, which was where James St. now runs into Brownsville St. Here some entered that property to seize three members of a Negro family which had been given employment by Josiah. Others went on to William East's a mile north at the end of what is now James St., still others to Zachariah Shugart's in Vandalia, and to Stephen Bogue's west of Vandalia. In each place they seized Negroes who had been given employment and lodging.

By now followed by a crowd of excited men, they turned southward to rendezvous at the wagons. At the north end of what is now Paradise Lake, they met the group from Osborns and Easts, also accompanied by many men and boys. Just before dawn they were joined by a large group of people from Cassopolis who had been alerted to the raid. The well-armed Kentuckians were faced by a large mob threatening to prevent them from moving farther southward. Threats and angry words mounted in intensity. History written forty years later credits the Quakers and their advice to detain the Kentuckians by taking the matter to court with preventing bloodshed.

Therefore, the crowd led the Kentuckians and their captives to Cassopolis, where the nine Negroes were jailed pending a court hearing. Both sides found legal counsel. In the absence of the Cass Co. Circuit Court Commissioner, the Berrien Co. Commissioner came to Cassopolis to hear the request for a writ of habeas corpus on behalf of the Negroes. When the Commissioner granted the writ, the fugitives were taken to the home of Ishmael and Sallie East Lee, where within a few days they left with their families on the underground for Canada.

In February, 1848 the Kentuckians brought suit in Federal Court in Detroit against eight Cass Co. men, including Josiah and Jefferson Osborn, Stephen Bogue, and Ishmael Lee for recovery of the value of the slaves. After many continuances, the jury disagreed, but the costs of the trial were borne by the defendants.

This was one of the cases resulting in the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which stimulated the abolition movement in the north.

--- A HOME FOR FREEDMEN ---

Free Negroes were attracted to Calvin by the availability of land and perhaps, by its Friendly character. In 1845 or 1846 Harvey Wade, Euson Tare, Nathaniel Boon, Turner and Crawford Bird, K. Artist, and Harrison Ash came from Logan Co., Ohio to settle in Calvin. When a Virginia planter died, his will freed

about forty slaves and left \$15,000 to provide for their settlement in free territory. This was done in Calvin Township. Decendants of these first families still live in Calvin.

--- ABOLITION, WAR, AND THE END OF A CLOSED COMMUNITY---

Birch Lake Quakers struggled to relate themselves helpfully to the angry and aggressive abolition movement, while keeping their testimonies of love and reconciliation. Some members of Birch Lake Meeting were disciplined by Indiana Yearly Meeting for over-zealousness in the abolition movement, and formed for a time a separate meeting of anti-slavery Friends.

That Birch Lake Quakers were able to maintain their testimony against war is suggested by the fact that there appear to be only four men bearing the surnames of these Friends among the hundreds of Cass Co. men serving in the Civil War.

Their concern for freedom for the Negro must have been essentially a unifying and life-giving one for this religious community. After the Civil War removed the issue of slavery, the life-blood of social concern apparently ebbed.

Much energy began to go into quarrels over outward forms -- for instance, to sing or not to sing. Those not occupying almost indestructible prairie land, lacking a knowledge of scientific agriculture, found crops less fullsome. Large families were confronted with not enough land to divide indefinitely. Many sons and daughters left to go farther north, as to Traverse City, or west, as to Missouri and Iowa, or to nearby towns and cities.

Eventually, the worshippers at Birch Lake who were left were absorbed into the Friends Church which had been

built in Vandalia in 1879 by some members of Prairie Grove Meeting. When Birch Lake Monthly Meeting was laid down, its property reverted to Indiana Yearly Meeting at Richmond, Indiana. Its spiritual legacy lies in the hearts and minds of descendants, some still living in the community, others scattered near and far.

--- BIRCH LAKE CEMETERY ASSOCIATION ---

On December 19, 1927 the Trustees of Indiana Yearly Meeting deeded the land of the cemetery and the Meeting House and its land to the Birch Lake Cemetery Association with this provision:

"It is understood that the property is to be kept in repair and used for religious meetings or any meeting for the spiritual betterment of the community."

--- THE END ---

Jane East Karkalits, who wrote this account in the summer of 1963, acknowledges the following sources of information:

History of Cass County, Michigan, Waterman

Watkins & Co. (Publ.), Chicago, 1882

(Loaned by Lillie Hunt East)

"An Historical Sketch of the East Family"

Susanna Bogue Smith, 1908,

Speech given by M. E. Ratliff at East-

Talbot Reunion, 1935 (unpublished)

Notes made by writer in conversation with her grandfather, Rollie East, in the Summer of 1933.

Records of Whitewater Monthly Meeting - Indiana.

Tales of Early Niles, Ralph Ballard, 1948.