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<https://doi.org/10.7275/6915203.0> [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations\\_2/374](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/374)

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**“NANTUCKET WOMEN”: PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND EDUCATION IN THE  
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NANTUCKET QUAKER WOMEN’S MEETING  
AND THE FOUNDATION FOR FEMALE ACTIVISM**

A Dissertation Presented

by

JEFFREY D. KOVACH

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2015

University of Massachusetts Amherst Five College Program in History

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Judith A. Kovach, for always supporting me in every endeavor, my father, John Kovach, Jr., for always challenging me to reach my potential, to my son, Hunter S. Kovach, for always bringing me joy, and to my wife, Jill S. E. Hagen, for always loving me unconditionally. It is also dedicated to my late father-in-law, the Rev. Glenn A. Hagen, whose love of lively religious discussion was only surpassed by the love he held for his family.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work only bears my name. It is the cumulative effort of a great number of people, all of whom I thank with all my heart. To my advisor, Barry Levy, thank you for your support and patience through this process. You have helped me become a better researcher, a better writer, and a better person. To the other members of my committee, Joyce Berkman, Neal Salisbury, and Eileen O'Neill, your work has helped shape this dissertation into what it is today.

To the staffs at the Nantucket Historical Association's Research Library, especially Elizabeth Oldham, and the Rhode Island Historical Society's Library which houses the records of the New England Yearly Meeting, particularly Marnie Miller-Gutsell, thank you for your cheerful help on my many research visits. I could not have accumulated the documentation I have without your assistance.

To my professors throughout my undergraduate and graduate career, thank you for your support in bringing me closer to this goal. I would like to offer special thanks to Maria Mitchell at Franklin and Marshall College, whose constant guidance and friendship has always been treasured, and Michael Gagnon at Georgia Gwinnett College, who guided me toward my study of the Religious Society of Friends while at William Paterson University.

To the various comments I have received throughout this process, most notably from moderators and commentators at conferences where I have presented parts of this dissertation, thank you for your feedback.

Finally, to my family, thank you for your loving patience and kindness during the writing of this dissertation. Since I began this process, I have lost two grandparents,

gained a son, and grown much closer to all of you than I ever thought possible. Through both the good times and the bad, you have always been there for me.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **“NANTUCKET WOMEN”: PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND EDUCATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NANTUCKET QUAKER WOMEN’S MEETING AND THE FOUNDATION FOR FEMALE ACTIVISM**

MAY 2015

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The women’s monthly meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, on Nantucket in the eighteenth century regulated the private lives of its members, particularly matters of marriage and sexuality. This regulation inhibited the behavior of female Friends, but it also served to create a culture of education and public authority for the island’s women. The women’s meeting maintained meticulous records of its proceedings and created a structure of oversight and hierarchy that allowed it to take every step possible to ensure the fitness of potential brides. As Quakerism had no mechanism for divorce, ensuring marriage remained holy according to the dictates of the meeting was essential to the preservation of the Quaker family on the island.

The family unit was of utmost importance on Nantucket in part because of the island’s whaling economy. As men engaged in the often gruesome and violent hunt for whales, their absences from home could extend for two to three years. This placed the financial well-being of the family in the hands of wives, who entered into the very public world of business on behalf of the family. For children, the primary role model of their youth was their mother. In later years, as boys apprenticed with family members and



other whaler Friends, girls learned Quaker tenets and the essentials of running a family economy and religious community from their mothers at home and in the meetinghouse.

Seeing women in positions of public religious authority and financial independence had an impact on future generations. Nantucket produced several female activists of the nineteenth century with ties to the Quaker meeting on the island. Sisters Lucretia Mott and Martha Coffin Wright, abolitionist Anna Gardner, scientist and women's rights advocate Maria Mitchell, and Unitarian preacher Phebe Hanaford could all trace their roots back to the Nantucket Quaker meeting of the eighteenth century. Both the women's rights movement, highlighted by the 1848 convention in Seneca Falls, New York, and the abolitionist movement had strong connections to Nantucket. This was a direct result of the strong public female leadership that emerged on the island in the eighteenth century.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

At Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, two sisters with family roots on the island of Nantucket led the women's rights convention. Lucretia Coffin Mott and Martha Coffin Wright, descended from the Nantucket Quaker community of the eighteenth century, joined Elizabeth Cady Stanton in organizing the convention and shaping its path. Quaker women in general were a major faction at Seneca Falls, pressing for women's rights, abolition, and other social causes popular in Quaker circles. Quaker influence at Seneca Falls came not only from Nantucket, but also from Philadelphia, as well as from upstate New York, near where the convention was held. Nantucket produced attendees at Seneca Falls and signers of the Declaration of Sentiments and nineteenth century reformers in both the women's rights and abolitionist causes. Anna Gardner, for example, was a leading abolitionist and, after the Civil War, a supporter of women's suffrage. She was a leading contributor to the island's first anti-slavery convention in August 1841. The anti-slavery and women's rights movements prior to the Civil War were intrinsically linked, and nowhere was that link more visible than in the overlap of attendees at abolitionist and women's rights events. How is it that the Religious Society of Friends had such a profound influence on nineteenth-century reform movements, and why did Nantucket play such an important role in shaping those movements?

The use of the term Friend provides a context into Quaker theology in general, and its impact on Nantucket specifically. The idea of "Friend," of course, is at the heart of Quaker theology. Friends considered themselves "Friends of Truth" or Friends in Christ, notions that transcended human friendship. The origin of the name Society of

Friends came from John 15:15, when Jesus refers to his disciples as Friends. The use of the term Friend in the context of a marital promise suggests a companionate marriage, one in which there was a true bond between wife and husband. Rather than marriages that could be based on political or economic gain, such as those found within the aristocracy of mainstream English Protestantism, Quaker marriage was deeply rooted in love — even within the upper levels of wealthy Quaker society on Nantucket.<sup>1</sup>

Emerging from the roots of the Protestant movement of the mid-seventeenth century and the English Civil War, the Religious Society of Friends was at first a revolutionary faith. Founder George Fox and his wife, Margaret Fell, preached of an Inner Light within people, the internal embodiment of God. The universality of the Inner Light removed gender distinctions and hierarchies, creating an equality of believers, unlike the hierarchy found in Puritanism. Despite this equality, there were some matters which Fox preached were more suited for women to address, rather than in mixed or men's meetings. This was the impetus for the creation of parallel, separate men's and women's business meetings within the communal structure of the local monthly meeting.

By the eighteenth century, Quakerism had become more mainstream on both sides of the Atlantic. The denomination faced less discrimination from courts in England and Massachusetts, but also was less revolutionary in its preaching. The establishment of Pennsylvania as a Quaker-founded colony further cemented its status among the mainstream Protestant faiths in the British Atlantic world. This turn toward the mainstream, though, came at a cost, as Friends lost some of the enthusiasm that came with being a revolutionary denomination. The Quaker tenets of plain speech and clothes,

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 73. Levy denotes the Foxian interpretation of ideal Christian love.

and the higher expectation of piety, were lost in the early eighteenth century. Discipline became more lenient. This led to reform movements emerging in the middle of the eighteenth century that would infuse the faith with greater expectations of piety.

The role the Nantucket Quaker women's meeting took in shaping the community in the eighteenth century is one reason why the descendants of Nantucket Quakers, like the Coffin sisters, became leaders in the women's rights movement, or, like Anna Gardner, led the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements. Quakerism established the religious and social foundation with its corollary political and moral values for the whaling empire that emerged on the island in the eighteenth century, and women like Lucretia Coffin Mott, Martha Coffin Wright, and Anna Gardner trace their roots back to the eighteenth-century Nantucket Quaker meeting.

This dissertation will demonstrate that the island's eighteenth-century Quaker women's meeting was a prominent institution in providing the foundation for nineteenth-century reformers. The authority and organization of the women's meeting, the defiance of some women to that rule, the public leadership of certain women on the island, and the increased role whaling wives played in the family's finances created a form of social capital in the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century reformers spent that accumulated capital, establishing a culture that embraced women's rights and the anti-slavery movement.

Nantucket, located about thirty miles off the southern coast of Cape Cod, had a population of about 2,000 Wampanoag when English Puritan Thomas Mayhew took possession of the island in 1641. Mayhew brought Christianity to the Wampanoag, but was careful not to infringe on the political structure of the indigenous communities. He

could not, however, stop the spread of disease which diminished the native population on the island in the seventeenth century. As more English settlers populated the island in the middle of the seventeenth century, disease took its toll on the Wampanoag. The 1659 purchase of the island from Mayhew by nine Merrimack Valley English proprietors, who would settle the island with families from the Merrimack region over the next few years. Some of the English surnames among those settlers would become quite well known on the island in the eighteenth century, including Coffin, Starbuck, Macy, Swain, and Barnard.<sup>2</sup> This migration of English to the island hastened the decline of the indigenous Nantucketers. By 1675, the Wampanoag population had fallen to about 1,500, most of whom had been converted to Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

At the turn of the eighteenth century, Nantucket's English population was about 300, in contrast with an indigenous population on the island of about 800 Wampanoag.<sup>4</sup> This English population would nearly double in two decades.<sup>5</sup> The remainder of the eighteenth century was similarly a period of dramatic growth on the island among English settlers, as well, with white population totals exceeding 4,000 in the 1780s and 1790s.<sup>6</sup> The size and prominence of the Quaker meeting similarly increased during the eighteenth century. From the initial nine petitioners for a monthly meeting in 1708, Friends numbered above 150 by 1728, and would reach above one thousand by the

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Byers, *The Nation of Nantucket: Society and Commerce in an Early American Commercial Center, 1660-1820* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 252-253.

middle of the century.<sup>7</sup> Friends' dominion over the island grew during the 1700s, with its peak coming shortly before the reforms of the 1760s and 1770s, along with the island's difficulties after the revolution and the establishment of New Bedford as a competing whaling center. Friends made up considerably more than thirty percent of the island's population before the decline of the last three decades of the century.<sup>8</sup> This included a substantial male population of whalers, while other men entered into ancillary maritime businesses on the island, though these trades were not as commonly found on the island as they were in other northern commercial ports.<sup>9</sup>

The island in general, and more specifically its female population, was marginalized from its geographic distance from the mainland and its minority status within Puritan Massachusetts. Geography was an unavoidable part of life on Nantucket. Nantucket Sound and the Atlantic Ocean offered daily reminders of Nantucket's outsider position. Because of the realities of such stark geographic marginalization and the isolation that came from remaining on the island while many fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons left home for months or years at a time, Nantucket women faced obstacles at home that helped shape the independent spirit of Nantucket women and the rise of the women's meeting as a strong autonomous body of authority on the island.

Certainly the isolation of Nantucket as an island in the Atlantic plays a major role in this story. Nantucket's legacy of dissenting and leading women extends back into the early eighteenth century, and the island's non-traditional religious roots run even further back than that. In the seventeenth century, Baptists from the mainland, mostly from the

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<sup>7</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. VI, 271.

<sup>8</sup> Byers, 265.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.



Merrimack Valley, arrived on Nantucket to seek refuge from the strong arm of Puritanism. In the eighteenth century, two of Nantucket's most famous residents were female. Mary Coffin Starbuck, after becoming a Friend in 1702, was the islander most responsible for the conversion to Quakerism on Nantucket. For a woman to set the spiritual direction of an entire eighteenth-century community was unusual. Starbuck herself pushed the boundaries of female propriety in the early eighteenth century. She was outspoken at town meeting and in Quaker meetings, though she would make sure to clarify that she was expressing not just her own sentiments, but those of her husband Nathaniel, as well. Later in the century, Kezia Coffin would become rather infamous on Nantucket, not only for expressions of her personal political views but also for her defiance of those who opposed her. She was disowned by the meeting for purchasing and keeping a spinet for her daughter to play. Her ties to lawyer Phineas Fanning, who would become her son-in-law, gave her the backing to pursue her own legal endeavors. Coffin was also an ardent Loyalist during the Revolution, a viewpoint that forced her relocation to Nova Scotia after the conclusion of the war. Joseph C. Hart's 1835 novel, *Miriam Coffin*, was based on her life. This work preceded by sixteen years Herman Melville's publication of *Moby Dick* — and in many ways told the story on the island that *Moby Dick* told from the perspective of the sea. Hart's work was enormously popular, both on and off the island. Both examples of influential Nantucket women, Mary Coffin Starbuck and Kezia Coffin, demonstrate eighteenth century women's strength on the island. That strength, I argue, led directly to the Nantucket female leaders of the nineteenth century reform movements.

The strong public authority of the women's meeting on Nantucket developed as a consequence of both geographic and political distance from the mainland. Quaker suspicion of secular politics led them to limit the scope of governmental power and to rely more on the influence of their energetic meeting system. Thus their meetings came to serve as an authority on several social and civil matters frequently addressed in other communities, and especially in other Massachusetts districts, by governmental authorities. This included marriage, disputes within families and between neighbors, regulation of conduct in public, and actions that the community viewed as threatening to its harmony. The role the women's meeting played in some of these decisions allowed for Nantucket's female population, as was the case in other Quaker communities, to assume a greater level of control over the affairs of its female population. For the women who rose to positions of power within the meeting, those positions of authority came with tremendous restraints. Quaker marital discipline could often be stricter than that found within Puritan or other Protestant denominations. Quakers as a whole were more restrictive when it came to marriage choice, for men and women alike, than Puritans on the mainland of the colony of Massachusetts and other Protestant groups in the British world in the eighteenth century were. The rigid discipline to which Quaker women adhered would lead some to reject the authority of the meeting. The combination of discipline, civil authority, and challenges to that authority created the organizational structure and leadership — with all its accompanying constraints — that would influence the leaders of the Seneca Falls Convention and various anti-slavery societies.

As was the case in Puritan New England in the eighteenth century, there are many examples of the integration of religion into government on the island of Nantucket.

Though theocracies have existed throughout human history, we do not see an infusion of religion into government on Nantucket. Quaker Nantucket was not a theocracy. The Quaker meeting was, however, a surrogate government. Governmental responsibilities were infused into the religious community, and the byproduct was not a church-led state, but a religious body that replaced governmental authority in many instances. The balance between religion and government is still a pertinent issue today, particularly when it comes to questions of marriage. The twenty-first century United States public debates issues like same-sex marriage in the same way the civil government of Massachusetts and the Quaker meeting regulated bigamy, or fornication, or later generations wrestled with the issues of interracial and same-sex marriage. In each of these cases, the outcomes for families rested on a difficult balance between religion and government. In some instances, the role of government trumped religious beliefs, such as in the issue of polygamy as the largely Mormon territory of Utah sought statehood at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nantucket's Quaker meeting, though, was an example of a religious entity substituting for civil authority. Just as Quaker wives became "deputy husbands" for the family's finances while men spent years at sea, the Quaker meeting became the institution that recognized and regulated marriage, sentenced folk for unruly behavior, and resolved disputes between Quakers. The meeting served in some ways as a surrogate government, assuming some of the duties of civil government — including marital regulation and conflict resolution — while not superseding that civil authority. In some ways, the meeting was filling a void on the island. "Although there were new areas of business and public life that came under at least the nominal purview of the town

meeting, local government on Nantucket continued to play and was expected to play a limited role.”<sup>10</sup> This was consistent with the Quaker tendency toward more liberal political views in the eighteenth century, including tolerance, limited government, and lower taxation.

Despite the relevance of the Quaker meeting, in particular the Nantucket women’s meeting, on marital regulations, scholars have mainly focused on other aspects of female life on the island. Most work on Nantucket Quakerism has emphasized the role the religion played with whalers, but not as much with the women who stayed on the island and served as overseers of the family’s economy. Robert Leach and Peter Gow wrote *Quaker Nantucket* in 1997, which examines the overall role of Quakerism on Nantucket. Nathaniel Philbrick’s 1994 book *Away Off Shore* highlights Quakerism’s close association with whalers at sea. Lisa Norling’s *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, published in 2000, addresses marital irregularities and the ways in which the meeting disciplined such offenses, but this is only a minor element of her overall work regarding the role of wives in the whaling industry in the nineteenth century. Other scholarly works that have addressed the more active roles taken by women in seventeenth and eighteenth century Quakerism include Rebecca Larson’s *Daughters of Light* and Phyllis Mack’s *Visionary Women*, two important works that portray the leading role Quaker women played as preachers and traveling ministers, but do not necessarily focus on the communal role the women’s meeting had in guiding the direction of a community’s female population. Barry Levy’s *Quakers and the American Family*, J. William Frost’s *The Quaker Family in Colonial America*, and Jean Soderlund’s article in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, “Women’s Authority in Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quaker Meetings, 1680-1760,” all

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 191.

address the importance of the meeting in shaping the family and the community, though Soderlund and Levy focus on the Delaware Valley and Frost's work is a more general geographical examination of Quakerism in British North America. Carla Gardina Pestana's *Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts* brings her study close to Nantucket by examining Quaker and Baptist minority religious communities within the colony, though much of her work on Quakers addresses meetings on the mainland.

No comprehensive work has fully explored the vital role the Nantucket Quaker women's meeting of the eighteenth century had in educating women who became the reformers of their generation. Nantucket had distinctive qualities compared to other Quaker communities, and those qualities drive the argument here. In the Delaware Valley, Quakers made up a majority of early settlers and became ingrained in the political workings of early Pennsylvania. Even as Friends became the minority in the Delaware Valley, they remained powerful due to their wealth and their establishment of the colony and its government. In Quaker communities on mainland New England, in the Hudson Valley, and in North Carolina, Quakers established communities of Friends, but were relatively small religious minorities surrounded by other powerful majority Protestant sects, such as Anglicans and Puritans. On Nantucket, though, Quakerism was the dominant faith for the eighteenth century, even if the civil authority was Puritan since Parliament ceded the island from New York to Massachusetts in 1692. Consequently, eighteenth-century Nantucket offers a rare glimpse of the impact of purely Quaker religious authority in New England. Nantucket's Quakers did not have to deal with a majority Puritan or Anglican population, as in mainland New England or North Carolina, nor did they become the ruling faction of the civil authority, as in Pennsylvania.

Nantucket was the pure example of Quaker regulation at work, a religious community free to serve as a surrogate government in substitution of civil authority on several matters. This authority extended not only to the island's men, indeed, but as whaling became the lynchpin to Nantucket's economy in the eighteenth century and a large part of the Quaker male community was often literally at sea, the women's meeting became increasingly important. In no other Quaker community in British North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries do we see Quaker leadership and especially female Quaker leadership so unencumbered by outside influence.

This dissertation seeks to establish the unique combination of circumstances on Nantucket, and then explain the role such distinctiveness had in creating a community that would eventually foster such women as Lucretia Coffin Mott, Martha Coffin Wright, and Anna Gardner, beginning with this introduction, the work's first chapter.

The second chapter establishes the historiography on the subject, setting apart my work from those who have previously studied Quaker women's meetings in New England or elsewhere in British North America.

In the third and fourth chapters, the importance of marriage to the Quaker meeting and to Quaker civil society is addressed. These chapters are designed to establish the Quaker ideal regarding marriage, to show how it aimed to shape all the morals on the island, and to demonstrate where the reality failed to meet that ideal and how these conflicts affected Quaker female leaders and followers. The third chapter outlines in general the Quaker marriage process, how it functioned on Nantucket, and the vital role women played in that process.

The fourth chapter notes the women's meeting's oversight of marriage, and in doing so how the meeting created an environment in which women assumed positions of leadership over other female Friends. Such authority not only provided an empowering force for women but also created tension in the community and led some women to reject meeting authority altogether.

The meeting's discipline of women who ran afoul of Quaker marital dictates provide the basis for the fifth and sixth chapters. The women's meeting as a public setting for female authority provides the basis for the fifth chapter. Women visibly disciplined their own when it came to fornication, incest, and other marital irregularities, and that discipline established the spirit of leadership essential to nineteenth-century reform.

The sixth chapter addresses the governance of bigamy and divorce. Without a true mechanism for divorce in the Quaker meeting, which existed in other parts of Puritan New England, women on Nantucket took extraordinary steps to ensure a happy marriage and the protection of wives within the marriage structure.

The final chapter demonstrates, using collective biography, how this combination of public female authority within the meeting, financial oversight for the family in the absence of husbands, and the independent spirit embodied in the rejection of established norms provided the foundation for the leadership of Lucretia Coffin Mott, Martha Coffin Wright, and Anna Gardner — among others — that would emerge luminously in the women's rights and anti-slavery movements of the nineteenth century.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ROLE OF THE WOMEN'S MEETING**

Eighteenth-century Nantucket Quaker female discipline and adherence to an organized, mandated morality built the foundation on which the women's rights and abolitionist reformers of the nineteenth century, including Lucretia Mott, Martha Coffin Wright, Anna Gardner, and Phebe Hanaford, constructed their reform movements. Power within the women's meeting was in the hands of a small number of chosen women who wielded tremendous public power over the meeting's female membership and thereby over the whole island community. This power was most evident and on public display in sanctioning of the marriages of female Friends, but could also be found in the contribution of funds for women in need, in the providing of support networks for widows, and in the regulating of other female members' violations of the meeting's regulations. The public authority of the women's meeting created a culture of female education where those who adhered to the strict guidelines set by those elect women would provide the organizational structure, the morality, and the problem solving skills for future generations of female Quaker leaders.

Some women conformed; others resisted the meeting's morality and polity. Some women exerted agency by directly opposing the authority of the women's meeting, particularly during the era of Quaker reform in the 1760s and 1770s. Similarly, some women voiced public opposition to the increasingly restrictive nature of the meeting that contributed to the anti-authoritarian and defiant spirit at the heart of nineteenth century reform movements. Lucretia Mott was even disowned for her own outspokenness. These contrasting responses to the organization and oversight of the women's meeting



culminated in a female population on the island that saw both female public power within a bureaucracy and resistance to female authority as essential to the education and empowerment of future generations of Nantucket women, creating the specific formula necessary to create a population of female reformers that became known as “Nantucket women.”

Though scholars’ arguments both highlight and diminish Quakerism’s role in female reform movements of the nineteenth century, no scholarship has addressed the relationship of Quaker education and discipline on those reform movements. Lisa Norling de-emphasizes the importance of eighteenth-century Quakerism on reform movements, suggesting that domesticity and religiosity impeded the advancement of female empowerment in *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Margaret Hope Bacon suggests that reform movements emerged from Quakerism’s egalitarian and liberal traditions to influence individual female Friends in her works.<sup>12</sup> I argue that Nantucket provided several women’s rights and female abolitionist leaders of the nineteenth century neither in spite of Quakerism nor as a result of the unique nature of Quaker egalitarianism. Instead, the women’s meeting, though bureaucratic and overweening regulation of women’s sexual and marital decisions, established a culture of education and organization essential to later reforms. Some evidence of this trend in the Delaware Valley is found in the works of Jean Soderlund, Barry Levy, and Jack Marietta.<sup>13</sup> This

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<sup>11</sup> Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife: New England Women and the Whalefishery, 1720-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Jean Soderlund, “Women’s Authority in Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quaker Meetings, 1680-1760,” *William & Mary Quarterly*, 44, 4 (Oct. 1987). See also Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, and

dissertation will make the case that Nantucket not only shared Philadelphia Friends' commitment to a strong women's meeting but that Nantucket illustrated the greatest combination of these factors and, as a consequence, Nantucket more than any other Quaker community nurtured female reform leaders. Further, it was both in embracing the restrictive organization of the women's meeting and in rejecting the meeting's authority that the spirit of reform could be found.

Lisa Norling wrote the sole major work on this connection, but her argument rejects the causal relationship between the Quaker women's meeting of the eighteenth century and female activism of the nineteenth. Norling argues that the shift toward domesticity was a nationwide movement that had taken roots on Nantucket and would eventually follow the whaling industry's move to New Bedford. Nevertheless, well before the secularization of Quaker religion practice into the phenomenon known as American domesticity, the role of woman as wife and mother was socially dominant on Nantucket and had priority over that of the woman as an agent for Quaker activism and religious speaking.

Family doctrine provided problems for Nantucket whaling families. Norling argues correctly that not only were women expected to manage the household and family for years at a time in their husbands' absences on long whaling voyages but they "were also supposed to be particularly and uniquely pious; religiosity had now become even more firmly a female gender characteristic, closely linked to domesticity."<sup>14</sup> Clearly, the domesticity Norling cites as an inhibiting force for women was always evident in Quaker

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Jack Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-1783* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Norling, 170.

societies. Nantucket's whaling culture only made the necessity of that domesticity more evident. Domesticity was a central part of Quaker communities. The connection of a wife's domestic duty to God's calling has its roots in Quakerism and its organization.

Norling makes the case that "(s)ome scholars have suggested that the experience of self-governance in their own separate meeting provided unusual opportunities for Quaker women to develop autonomous leadership skills, personal initiative, and a sense of competence."<sup>15</sup> In this instance, she specifically addresses the arguments made by Mary Maples Dunn and Jean Soderlund, both of whom posited the notion that the women's meeting was an empowering force for female Quakers in their communities, though neither focused on Nantucket's female Quaker community. Norling continues to state that this "may well have been the case in other communities of Friends, but on eighteenth-century Nantucket these lessons were offered to very few women."<sup>16</sup> The same argument might be made that since the Massachusetts House of Representatives contained a small fraction of the men in the colony, representative government was politically insignificant. Additionally, Norling fails to recognize the legacy of Nantucket's female Friends. At a cursory glance, it is true that Quaker women faced obstacles on Nantucket that were not prevalent in other Quaker communities, or in other New England religious communities. Apparently Captain Ahab had a wife but it was not Lucretia Mott or anyone like her. Historically it most certainly was in telling cases.

Quaker women faced more strict regulations in terms of marriage than their mainland Protestant counterparts encountered, as this dissertation will show. It is not, however, as much a reflection of a patriarchal Quaker theology as it is the social and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 60.

economic realities of an isolated land dependent on a masculine trade for its wealth. The absence of husbands may only provide a temporary means by which women could manage the household economy, as Norling suggests. Arguing that this had limited long-term effects for the feminism that will be born from the female Quaker legacy on Nantucket, however, is predicated on a binary view of women's history, one in which women could be either empowered champions of their sex or victimized subjects to patriarchal social structures, but not both. It is my argument that women could exist simultaneously on both levels, repressed by a sometimes inflexible religiosity and economic system, but also empowering themselves in accepting roles of public leadership by assuming positions of authority within the women's meeting, managing the household's finances, serving as traveling ministers (even if that power was not always equal to that of men in lateral positions within the meeting), or even exerting agency by rejecting the rigid expectations of the meeting on them. Norling's work does not adequately address the empowering public and organizational position the women's meeting had in Nantucket society and thereby created for some women, and how growing up in a community where there was such a public display of women in positions of authority could impact future generations of reformers. While Norling does discuss a few women who attained public authority on Nantucket, she never addresses the impact such public female authority had on women on the island as a whole.

Norling does make a major contribution by documenting the economic role of the whaler wife and mother in the family's economy. She specifically refers to the role such women played in handling the business affairs of the family during extended absences of their whaler spouses as being that of "deputy husbands," a term originated by Laurel

Thatcher Ulrich in *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*.<sup>17</sup> Their role was not a threat to their husbands, nor was there any competition within the family over who assumed the role of business leader when both spouses were on the island.

(W)omen's efforts were not viewed as so much different from, and certainly not competing with, but rather as complementing men's activities...As 'deputy husband,' a sea-wife could and did often perform tasks her husband normally would have, such as settling accounts in cash or goods with creditors or debtors, insuring cargo, and paying taxes.<sup>18</sup>

Norling's examples of this came from the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, but this need appeared as early as the middle of the 1700s. This role of "deputy husband" no doubt evolved over time, but some of those same business transactions needed to be conducted in the 1740s and 1750s, as well as in the 1780s and beyond. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the absence of husbands increased in direct proportion with the more ambitious lengths of whaling voyages. This placed a larger — or at least longer — burden of the family's finances on wives. In some cases, the business activities in which deputy husbands engaged included direct negotiations with men. For the wives of ship captains, there were bills for various maritime necessities to be paid, whether it was to a blacksmith, a rope maker, or a cooper. In these instances, women handled the affairs for their interests with men who, unlike their husbands, were on the island and able to conduct their own affairs. Since husbands continued to place the family's fortunes in the hands of their wives, it would suggest these women held their own in such matters — and perhaps were even seen by other parties as equals, extensions of a single familial entity of

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<sup>17</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 36.

<sup>18</sup> Norling, 36.

husband and wife, thus earning the same respect in that regard as their husbands would if they had conducted the transactions themselves.

The notion of “deputy” husband suggests a hierarchy within the family. Norling argues that the patriarchal nature of the family remained despite this temporary authority, and that the long-term gains made by wives in serving in this capacity were limited. The wife could handle the husband’s finances in his absence, and often do a commendable job, but she was still the deputy, and the family finances were still his to maintain when he was home to do so. As with her argument downplaying the influence of the women’s meeting in creating a culture of female empowerment on Nantucket, Norling’s introduction of the idea of deputy husbandry on the island does not sufficiently herald the impact of this development on women’s education and self-image. She is quick to assert how on returning from years-long whaling voyages, men resumed their position as head of the household, both symbolically and financially.

Nevertheless, the family economy was essential to the perpetuation of Truth, whether it be in the Delaware Valley, in England, or on Nantucket. The Quaker meeting was founded on the notion of Truth, the belief that Friends embodied the true word of God, and the expectation that Friends would only speak Truth. This provided spiritual authenticity to all Quaker speech, both in private and in public. For women to serve in such a public role as de facto head of household, even if only temporarily, would have a lasting impact on the daughters of those deputy husbands. Not only did women protect the family economy but they also preserved Truth in the home and in the community. Lucretia Mott cited the public role women had in family finances as shaping the attitudes of nineteenth century women who called the island home. As Carol Faulkner argues in

her 2011 work, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, "Lucretia believed these early influences helped her defy the limited domestic and fashionable lives of most middle-class Victorian women," and that, "at a young age Lucretia rejected the idea that women were spiritually or intellectually inferior to men."<sup>19</sup> When Faulkner writes of the "early influences" on Lucretia Mott, she is referencing the role her mother, Anna Folger Coffin, served in running the family's economy in the absence of Thomas Coffin, Mott's seafaring father, as well as the importance of Quakerism in establishing a culture of egalitarian education. Mott may have only spent the first eleven years of her life on Nantucket, but her time on the island left such an impression that she recounted it in an exchange of correspondence with Elizabeth Cady Stanton more than a half-century later.<sup>20</sup> Mott's own admission of the importance of Nantucket Quakerism in creating a culture of reform-minded women refutes Norling's assertion that Quaker women on Nantucket squandered their opportunities for female empowerment by the nineteenth century by succumbing to domesticity.

As noted Norling also underestimates the importance of the women's meeting on Nantucket. As shall be seen, more than any other institution it shaped the family and social order of the island by overseeing the behavior and morals of the women who ran the island in their husbands' absence and by providing a clear and public hierarchy of female social power and responsibility.

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<sup>19</sup> Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 8-9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Margaret Hope Bacon's scholarship preceded Norling's and Faulker's works in examining Quaker influence in female reform movements, and established a more direct connection between Quakerism and feminism that those later works would not echo. In 1980, she published *As the Way Opens: The Story of Quaker Women in America*, and her 1986 work *Mothers of Feminism*, which shared the same subtitle as her previous work, established a permanent place in women's history for Quaker studies. *Mothers of Feminism* stresses the independence of women in the Society of Friends as compared to women in other denominations. Bacon argues that Quakers were the founders of the American feminist movement, long before the term "feminism" became a part of the scholarly lexicon. To support her assertions, Bacon cites traveling ministers from the early days of Quakerism, such as Mary Dyer, one of the Society's early New England martyrs.<sup>21</sup> She also describes women's meetings, such as the Rhode Island Women's Quarterly Meeting, which were established in 1704, as having "nurtured a strong tradition of independence."<sup>22</sup> This optimistic interpretation of the role women played in the early years of Quakerism influenced other historians of Quaker gender relations, and launched an energetic movement of Quaker women's history. That movement manifested itself most often into scholarship that heralded the achievements of individual women, mostly from the women's rights movement of the nineteenth century. Activists such as Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony found their tales told in biographical anthologies. Carol and John Stoneburner published a work shortly after Bacon published *Mothers of Feminism*. That work, *The Influence of Quaker Women on American History*, had a similarly positive interpretation of Quaker women and their influence on the greater society. Bacon

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<sup>21</sup> Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 25-26.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.



made a contribution by drawing attention to Quaker women's remarkable overrepresentation among female reformers and leaders in the nineteenth century as seen in *Notable American Women*.

Bacon's argument is on the opposite side of the spectrum from Norling's regarding the importance of Quakerism toward female activism. While Norling views domesticity as an inhibiting force to female empowerment, Bacon sees Quaker domesticity as a catalyst for feminism, even a precursor to the women's rights movements. Bacon does well in establishing the importance of education in Quaker communities in establishing female leadership. Her work also reflects how Quaker women established public visibility, while women in other Protestant denominations remained relegated to private life. This visibility could be found in seventeenth-century female traveling ministers and eighteenth century authority figures in women's meetings.

Bacon, however, does not address the rigid elements found in Quaker discipline, particularly in regulations of marriage and the family. Quaker discipline, while providing opportunities for female enforcement, was to a large degree quite restrictive about marriage, the family, and sexuality. Gender egalitarianism within the Society of Friends did not provide the foundation for reform, since the Quaker community was not one of full gender equality. The culture of female religious education found within the women's meeting on Nantucket provided reformers like Lucretia Mott and Martha Coffin Wright the foundation for their nineteenth century activism. Constructing the foundation for reform came at a cost, and that cost was a piety in the public governance of members' private affairs. There was a sacrifice to be made if a woman wished to become a leader in her community. To achieve status and authority within the meeting, women had to submit

to both adhering to and administering its rigid regulation of behavior. Over time, those women who rose up the ranks of the meeting, thus acquiescing to its regulation, would one day become the enforcers of that regulation on the next generation of Quaker women, educating the future leaders of the meeting, and therefore perpetuating the piety of Truth within the women's meeting.

Jean Soderlund continued the trend of focusing on the important role the women's meeting had over its membership, in contrast with women in other Christian denominations who were often subject to a patriarchal enforcement of discipline — either from the church or from the state. In her article, “Women's Authority in Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quaker Meetings, 1680-1760,” she extends the argument on the importance of the women's meeting by exploring the same topic in the Delaware Valley, while taking a more nuanced stance on the relationship between Quakerism and female reform. Soderlund argues that the use of the term independence is not an accurate assessment for examining the power Quaker women exerted. According to Soderlund, Quaker women did not “operate in a context in which they competed with men or engaged in a power struggle for independence.”<sup>23</sup> Quaker women succeeded in attaining a partnership with men in regulating the conduct of Friends by working in unison with the men's meeting. The focus of Soderlund's work is on the synthesis of gender-specific meetings for the common good of the entire meeting. Still, this indicates the women's meeting served as an example of greater balance between the genders in the Quaker community. Soderlund's work answers many questions about the vital role the women's meeting played in shaping female Quakerism in the Delaware Valley.

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Soderlund, “Women's Authority in Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quaker Meetings, 1680-1760,” *William & Mary Quarterly*, 44, 4 (Oct. 1987): 723.

Nantucket, though, differed from the Delaware Valley in ways that impacted that relationship. The agrarian meetings in southeastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey and the merchant class in Philadelphia did not see male membership leave for months, or even years, at a time, as the meeting on Nantucket did as a result of whaling voyages. Because of this, women in the Delaware Valley did not monopolize the moral and financial affairs of the family in the way Nantucket women did during whaling voyages. This also impacted female education, as the necessity for developing a class of independent women schooled in the moral dictates of Truth was not as independent of male oversight as it was on Nantucket. Female Friends in the Delaware Valley similarly did not publicly exert authority and, at times, autonomy outside of the meeting the way Nantucket women did. These circumstances existed on Nantucket, and set apart the eighteenth century women's meeting on the island from that found in Philadelphia and the surrounding region.

Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley, however, do provide insight into an even larger Quaker community, even if it does not share in the same geographic hardships and economic realities as Nantucket. Barry Levy examines the community of Friends and the importance of the family, marriage, and domesticity in the Delaware Valley in his 1988 work, *Quakers and the American Family*. Levy's work explores women within the context of the family unit. Unlike previous scholarship that had only seen Quaker women who acted outside of marriage and the family unit, Levy explores how women who were part of traditional Quaker family structures could also lead autonomous lives both at home and in the community. This began with the ideal of Christian love, and its role in creating successful marriages. Friends "wanted partners to love one another before they

wed in order to assure the spiritual aura and vitality of the household.”<sup>24</sup> As Levy points out, “Quaker ministers stressed this was to be a self-denying, virtuous, Christian love, not romantic lust.”<sup>25</sup> Domesticity was at the forefront for Quaker communities in the colonies seeking to retain the morality of the denomination’s founder, George Fox. Levy argues that the establishment of domesticity in the Religious Society of Friends found fertile ground, literally, in southeastern Pennsylvania. “The land was ample and favored to support the Quaker settlers’ enormously expensive child nurturing and settling ambitions.”<sup>26</sup> The meetings that developed around the Quaker settlement in the Delaware Valley provided Friends the opportunity to establish a perpetual Quaker community tied to the land. Such a desire was possible in the Delaware Valley, as land was both in abundance and fertile and profitably linked to the rich West Indian sugar economy by the port of Philadelphia. As Levy points out, further north, into New York and the New England colonies, the glaciers that covered those regions during the last Ice Age, but had not reached the Delaware Valley, had stripped much of the soil of the minerals that were found in great quantity in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Levy’s argument regarding the connection of Quaker domesticity to the land works for the Delaware Valley, as does Jean Soderlund’s work on the women’s meeting in the same region. In both cases, their scholarship is specific to the region, but does not fully apply to the culture that emerged on Nantucket. The public presence of women into the family’s economy and the scarcity of land which was better suited for sheep grazing than for agriculture made Nantucket’s version of Quaker domesticity, both in the home

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<sup>24</sup> Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, 133.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 124.

and in meeting, one that did not parallel southeastern Pennsylvania. Nantucket's maritime economy created a domestic world far different from that found in the Delaware Valley. The necessity for women to assume public roles otherwise reserved for men made Nantucket Quaker women far more responsible for the preservation of both Quaker peace and the family's financial security than the world of pacifist and nearly always present farmer husbands in which Pennsylvania's female Friends lived.

In her article "Latest Light on Women of Light," Mary Maples Dunn asks why historians should take an interest in Quaker women. She answers her own question by suggesting that "Quaker women were deeply and actively engaged in every phase of Quaker development from the inception of the movement."<sup>27</sup> Her research synthesizes the work done by Soderlund and Levy, among other Quaker scholars. Dunn specifically cites Levy's interpretation that Quaker women found the greatest level of authority not solely in women's meetings, or even solely as traveling ministers, but in the synthesis of all aspects of their lives, including the domestic. The role of wife and mother served to strengthen the authority women had in their own meetings and as ministers.<sup>28</sup> Dunn argues that in American Quakerism, the public empowerment of women existed from its founding and, unlike in England, was not lost during the eighteenth century as the Society became increasingly mainstream Protestant. This argument supports the Quaker transformation on Nantucket, where women took leading roles from its inception in the first decade of the eighteenth century, especially with Mary Coffin Starbuck leading the conversion of the island to Quakerism. Dunn's synthesis views American Quaker

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Maples Dunn, "Latest Light on Women of Light," in Elisabeth Potts Brown and Susan Mosher Stuard, ed., *Witnesses for Change: Quaker Women over Three Centuries* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 71.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

women's experiences as a single entity, though. Her work does not fully address the diversity between female Friends' experience in the Delaware Valley, New England, and elsewhere in the English-speaking world.

Phyllis Mack, first in "Gender and Spirituality in Early English Quakerism, 1650-1665," and later in "Religion, Feminism, and the Power of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism," and in her 1994 book, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*, focuses on the spiritual aspects of Quaker women's experiences. Her works examine the role devotion to the religion was in its own way emblematic of agency. In "Gender and Spirituality in Early English Quakerism, 1650-1665," Mack suggests that a "primary tenet of early Quakerism was that the hierarchical character of gender relations, indeed of all social relationships, was a product of human sinfulness."<sup>29</sup> This presents Quakerism in direct opposition to the traditional patriarchal society found in other Christian societies. She echoes this in "Religion, Feminism, and the Power of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism." Once again, she rebuts the notion that women could only exert agency by acting outside of established religious contexts. In *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*, Mack offers religion as a means for women to eschew traditional gender roles. Through Quaker religion and public ministry, women could break through the limitations set on them in other aspects of society. Mack's argument focuses on the empowering nature of religion, but Nantucket women were empowered financially as well over the course of the eighteenth century. In most women's meetings, including on Nantucket, women publicly empowered themselves within meeting by sacrificing their

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<sup>29</sup> Phyllis Mack, "Gender and Spirituality in Early English Quakerism, 1650-1665," in *Witnesses for Change*, 39.

agency. Those who refused to subject themselves to the authority of the meeting in turn sacrificed the opportunity to become an empowered leader within the female Quaker community so they could maintain their agency. Mack makes a strong case for women finding strength from within religious institutions, and like Soderlund helps develop the argument that whether in the context of traveling ministry or in the women's meeting, Quaker religiosity could further the public image of women in seventeenth and eighteenth century Anglo-American communities. Like other Quaker scholarship, though, this does not answer lingering questions about Nantucket and its specific role in establishing future generations of female Quaker reformers.

The argument linking domesticity to religiosity in a form that provided women greater public opportunities for empowerment can be found in Rebecca Larson's 1999 book *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700-1775*. Larson argues that, "a woman's duties to her husband were delicately balanced with her service to God, since evidence of a legitimate 'calling' to the ministry included the way in which one treated family members."<sup>30</sup> The belief of gender equality established by George Fox and echoed by his wife, Margaret Fell — the notion that both men and women were equal under God — allowed women as well as men to travel throughout the English world, on both sides of the Atlantic, preaching to any who would listen. Fell's *Women's Speaking Justified* argued for women to receive the same consideration as men when it came to speaking what Friends considered Truth. As Larson states, "(t)he notion of exemplary motherhood found in memorials of deceased eighteenth-century Quaker female ministers differs sharply from the nineteenth-century

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<sup>30</sup> Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700-1775* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 144.

ideology of domesticity (in which a woman devoted herself to family and home) so influential in English and American culture.”<sup>31</sup> Those ideas of service to higher spiritual callings had their roots in the very beginning of Quakerism, in England in the middle of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, domesticity was at the core of Quaker communities, a necessary element in the perpetuation of Truth. Quaker women on Nantucket in the eighteenth century found that balance between serving the family and serving God in establishing a community of morality and public Truth. The “Nantucket women” spoken of by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton came from the communal and institutional world, and not the “nineteenth-century ideology of domesticity” spoken of by Larson.

This adherence to a more strict morality on Nantucket mirrors what was transpiring throughout the Quaker world at that time, which was in direct contrast with Puritan law. Jack Marietta details this shift in Friends’ enforcement of morality in *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-1783*. In this work, published in 1984, Marietta accounts for a significant shift in Quaker society occurring around 1755, from the rise of an anti-authoritarian spirit to meetings increasing enforcement and discipline for offenses. Reform for American Friends came in the form of increased enforcement of discipline by meetings for fornication, exogamy, and other offenses. This is a response to a Quaker community that was largely dissatisfied with the leniency of the meeting in previous decades. “By the early 1760s, Friends were obviously unhappy with their disciplinary practice and especially their toleration of irregular marriages.”<sup>32</sup> This

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>32</sup> Jack Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-1783* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 65.



movement toward greater Quaker regulation in the name of piety was in contrast to a more lenient regulation of marriage by Puritans.

Marietta's work frames the reform movement of the mid-eighteenth century as the catalyst for several changes during that period. He addresses the increased regulation of marriage from meetings in the Delaware Valley, showing the substantial spike in marriage offenses in the 1750s and 1760s. Encouraged by traveling ministers who pushed for greater piety in Quakerism, new reform-minded leaders rose to positions of leadership within the meetings near Philadelphia. Those reforms established not only an increased importance on the stability of marriage and the family but also several other causes, including opposition to slaveholding Friends and excessive drunkenness, two causes that would define nineteenth century reform. Marietta argues this push toward greater piety set Friends further apart from the "world," as they retreated from public office and participation in the larger religiously pluralistic colonies in which Friends lived. It became increasingly important for Friends to demonstrate to their non-Quaker neighbors that their Society was aligned with Truth. Ensuring the sincerity of that message meant keeping tight reins on any actions that might seem in conflict with that Truth Friends so often professed.

Of all the scholars who have addressed the role of the meeting in the eighteenth century on nineteenth century reform, Marietta's work has most closely shaped this dissertation. Just as my work does, he examines the increase in Quaker self-regulation of the second half of the eighteenth century. Marriage and the family play a part in that, but the public, yet still internal, way in which Friends weeded out those who did not follow the tenets of the Society sent a message that extended beyond the domestic and into the

community at large. Where my work differs from Marietta's is in the end result of the reforms of the later eighteenth century. Marietta outlines a Quaker withdrawal from Pennsylvania politics, rejecting an institution that had been shaped by Friends since its founding in the 1680s. On Nantucket, Friends held positions of authority in local politics, but had far less say in the administration of the colony than in Quaker Pennsylvania. The "Nantucket women" described by Mott in her correspondence with Elizabeth Cady Stanton became the island's legacy of that same larger, Quaker-wide reform movement that swept through meetings on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than backing out of the public eye, the descendants of the Quaker establishment on Nantucket by the end of the eighteenth century increased their public image, taking leading roles in the causes of abolition and women's rights.

As Marietta revealed a Quaker reformation in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, J. William Frost pointed to what he called a "Quaker awakening."<sup>33</sup> His 1973 book, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America*, establishes an argument for Quakerism's shift toward abolition (and pacifism) as Friends' response to a changing Protestant landscape around them in the colonies. Unlike other Protestant denominations, Friends, Frost argues, did not embrace the Great Awakening, but rather had an awakening of their own.<sup>34</sup> Frost's view on the increasing turn toward piety among Friends and Marietta's argument of reform complement each other quite well. Frost sees Quakerism's increasingly rigid discipline from the 1750s through the 1770s and beyond to be an attempt by its new leadership to turn back the clock to its origins in the middle of the

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<sup>33</sup> J. William Frost, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America: A Portrait of the Society of Friends* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 58.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

seventeenth century in England, much in the same way Puritans and other Protestants viewed the evangelical fervor of the Great Awakening as an opportunity to return to the piety of previous generations, a piety that had been lost. For Quakers, though, this more rigid discipline would have a detrimental effect on the denomination's numbers. The Great Awakening caused schisms in some denominations between Old Lights and New Lights, but it did increase interest in those faiths from a new crop of potential members. Quaker meetings saw a radically different response from their membership to their awakening. According to Frost, "By refusing to compromise and by trying to maintain all previous religious testimonies unchanged, the denomination turned its back upon the Enlightenment and the emerging American pattern of evangelical religion."<sup>35</sup> He points out disownments decreased membership in meetings, as well as reducing the size, and ultimately the influence, of the Society in America. This is true in the Delaware Valley, as Friends withdrew from public office. It even is true in general on Nantucket, as the meeting would not hold such dominion over the island in the nineteenth century as it did in the eighteenth. It can be argued, however, that the increased Quaker focus toward abolition and social reform, including women's rights, would ultimately be a major factor in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the reforms that brought about an end to slavery and greater legal rights for women, including suffrage. Quaker influence in the contemporary world may have decreased with diminishing membership and the withdrawal from Pennsylvania politics, but the fingerprints of Friends can be found on later reform movements.

As illustrated, several scholars have addressed one or more aspect of Quakerism's role in reform, a comprehensive study is lacking on the role of eighteenth-century Quaker

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 61.

women on Nantucket on nineteenth century reform movements, including abolition and women's rights. I intend to fill this scholarly void with this dissertation, drawing connections between the public female leadership of the eighteenth century women's meeting on Nantucket and the nineteenth-century reformers who can trace their roots to that meeting. These connections are most visible with the women's meeting's primary task, marital regulation, but they also exist in the other important tasks of the women's meeting, including providing for female Friends in need and disciplining offenses outside of marriage, as well as in the vital public role Nantucket "deputy husbands" played in the island's economic well-being.

### CHAPTER 3

## THE WORLD TURNED INSIDE OUT: THE QUAKER MARRIAGE SYSTEM ON NANTUCKET

On November 28, 1709, Eunice Coffin and Ebenezer Gardner became the first couple to petition the Quaker women's meeting for permission to marry. The couple "laid their intention of marriage before this meeting."<sup>36</sup> Two women who would play prominent roles in the early meeting, Dorcas Gayer Starbuck and Priscilla Starbuck Coleman, investigated the couple for "clearness."<sup>37</sup> When Starbuck and Coleman concluded the first women's meeting investigation for marriage, Eunice Coffin was deemed clear to marry, and the women's meeting gave the couple their blessing to proceed. This one declaration of their intent to marriage established the role of the women's meeting in investigating all potential marriages, as had been done in other Quaker meetings. After receiving approval, the wedding itself was a relatively unremarkable event — aside from being the meeting's first. The marriage did not last, however. Eunice would die in 1718 after giving birth to her fourth child, who was named after her mother.<sup>38</sup> Despite its brevity, though, this marriage would initiate the vital eighteenth century institution of Quaker marriage to Nantucket.

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<sup>36</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meetings, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 1. The date listed in the meeting minutes is 9 mo. 28 d. 1709. This is in accordance with Quaker practice of listing dates by number, instead of using the names of days and months. It also is indicative of the pre-1752 calendar, when March was considered the first month. At that time, January and February would often have the notation of two years listed. For instance, the women's meeting that met on February 28, 1726 was recorded as, "28 d. of ye 12 mo. 1725/6."

<sup>37</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meetings, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 1.

<sup>38</sup> The Eliza Starbuck Barney Genealogical Record, available online from the Nantucket Historical Association, [www.nha.org](http://www.nha.org)

The language most often used in the meeting minutes to describe the investigation process was an examination of the “clearness” of the bride or groom. In cases where the couple represented two different meetings, each partner would be investigated by her or his own meeting. A woman from Nantucket marrying a man from Newport would be investigated by the Nantucket women’s meeting, while her future husband was investigated by the men’s meeting in Newport. An example of this is Bethiah Folger, who was from the Nantucket meeting, but was marrying Samuel Barker from the mainland.<sup>39</sup> She was investigated by the women’s meeting on Nantucket, and he by his own men’s meeting. In such instances of partners from two meetings, once both partners had been deemed “clear” to marry, they would receive written confirmation to be shown to the other meeting. Use of this term on Nantucket can be found in the very first marriage in the meeting, when the meeting appointed Dorcas Starbuck and Priscilla Coleman “Inspect her Clearness” before permitting Eunice Coffin to marry Ebenezer Gardner in 1709. The investigators “finding things Clear give our answer they may Proceed.”<sup>40</sup> This term referred to a partner being “clear” of all others — in other words not having another spouse. But it also could suggest one to be clear from certain vices that could harm the family unit. The goal of the meeting was to create families that would provide the structure for “holy conversation.”

Parents constructed the foundations for Quaker teaching of morality and piety within the home. This was known as “holy conversation,” the first and most important building block for young Friends. “Holy conversation” applied to speech within the

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<sup>39</sup> *Nantucket Women’s Monthly Meetings*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

home, but it also applied to “gesture, conduct, and presence.”<sup>41</sup> All aspects of moral education within the home fell under “holy conversation.” In this institution, Friends had a domestic mechanism in place for ensuring parents raised children according to Truth. The home became the central place of Quaker education in the eighteenth century, particularly in the earliest years of a young Friend’s life. That education would carry from the inner world of the home to the outer world of the meeting as children matured, a Quaker example of a world turning inside out.

Intimacy was at the heart of Quaker Truth and Light. Private, intimate relations within the family shaped public life, and created a society in which the Holy Spirit, not fear of legal sanction from civil authorities, would dictate sociable and positive behavior. This intimacy took place first and foremost in the home, both between adult women and men and between adults and children. The home, built upon a loving marriage, was critical to the inward and outward health of the Quaker community, as inward domesticity guided the outward direction of the meeting. Because marriage was such an important part of the private and public world for Quakers, women held an unusual level of power in the community. Women became central to morality and community development, which is why in Quakerism the private became the public, working inside out, conflating the traditional division of spheres. The status of Quaker women was further elevated on Nantucket because of the absence of men for lengthy periods of time, and the necessary male attachment to the often violent and bloody economic pursuit of whaling.

Because the institution of marriage was at the center of Quaker domesticity and education, it preserved harmony and provided the private structure for more public

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<sup>41</sup> Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, 59.

displays of Truth. The stability of the home created the culture of education that encouraged the development of female empowerment. It allowed for mothers to serve as role models for daughters, particularly when it came to morality and the handling of the family's business affairs. Marriage also provided educational opportunities for boys in elementary schooling, in connections for apprenticeships, and in Quaker morality. The Quaker marriage system on Nantucket created a paradox for women, though. On one hand, it was through the meeting's oversight of marriage that women ascended to roles of public power and prominence. On the other, younger women who had not reached those heights within the meeting hierarchy found themselves living under a strict set of guidelines. Those guidelines were often more suppressive than marriage disciplines found in other religious communities or in civil law. Achieving an elevated status within the women's meeting, one that offered public authority and guidance over other women, meant subjecting oneself to the heightened levels of scrutiny earlier in life. This chain of public moral education created by the marriage system led to a new generation of female reformers for the nineteenth century.

Marriage and divorce law in Massachusetts predated the Quaker conversion of Nantucket by more than a half century. Puritan theocratic rule played a heavy hand in almost every aspect of the lives of early Massachusetts settlers. Yet Quaker communities, serving as surrogate civil authorities on such matters and dictated by religious principles, established a code for marriage that was more restrictive than that found in Puritan communities. Friends had established themselves in Massachusetts and to a lesser degree on Nantucket since the middle of the seventeenth century, even though the island did not have its own meeting until 1708. After persecutions and executions at the hands of



Puritan authorities, London came to the aid of the Quakers. In 1661, the King issued a proclamation that “if there be any of those People called Quakers amongst you, now already condemned to suffer Death, or other Corporal Punishment, or are imprisoned, or obnoxious to the like Condemnation, you are to forbear to proceed any farther.”<sup>42</sup> Such action having to come from across the ocean indicates just how strongly Puritan persecution of Quakers was, and just how desperate the situation had become. The island also was under the control of the colony of New York until 1691, so it offered a haven from Puritan Massachusetts.<sup>43</sup> Though Puritan discrimination had ended by this time, and Massachusetts law even protected Quakers from military service, Friends had not forgotten the homicidal persecutions of more than three decades past. Nantucket provided geographic separation from Puritan persecutions, both before and after the island became part of Massachusetts, and ultimately allowed for the establishment of Quaker regulations that deviated from civil law. Nantucket was a natural location for the establishment of a strong Quaker seafaring community.

Quaker communities tended to be self-contained, self-policing enclaves within larger provinces or on islands like Nantucket that had distance from colonial authority, and answered to a hierarchy of Friends that included quarterly and monthly meetings. Legally, Quakers took great strides to settle disputes within meeting, rather than going to civil authorities. Meetings took this matter quite seriously, including discipline for Friends who took disputes to the courts instead of the meetinghouse. In New England, unlike Philadelphia, Quakers did not control the government in the early part of the

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<sup>42</sup> *Early Settlers of Nantucket: Their Associates and Descendants*, comp. Lydia S. Hinchman (Philadelphia: Ferris and Leach, 1901), 90.

<sup>43</sup> Norling, 54.

eighteenth century. That took some of the civil power and authority away from the meeting, but substituted it with a religious power. The only way the meeting could maintain total autonomy over its members was to remain isolated from the rest of society. This attitude explains not only Quaker thoughts on marrying outside the fold, but also on handling all matters internally.

The Quaker practice of internalizing regulations and blurring the lines between religion and the state created a surrogate government in the meeting. Because the Nantucket Monthly Meeting sought to handle all issues from property disputes to marriage to acts of Quaker-on-Quaker violence, both the responsibility and the power that government held in Puritan and religiously pluralistic communities fell predominantly on the meeting. Quakerism's dominance from the beginning of the eighteenth century on Nantucket made it the most powerful body of authority in the largest whaling empire on earth. The division of power along gender lines for much of the meeting's work meant that for Quaker women, the women's meeting was the strongest and most influential organization in their lives, more important than the men's meeting or civil government. The women's meeting had the most direct contact with an individual female Friend on the island. The women's meeting sent visitors to investigate transgressions, or to ensure clearness, thereby retaining that importance in governing the everyday lives of its members. This female-led culture of authority and moral education became a hallmark of nineteenth-century female reform movements.

The limited reliance on Nantucket of civil government allowed for two institutions to serve as regulating bodies for islanders in the eighteenth century alongside the civil government; Quakerism and the family. Both served as surrogate governing

bodies for the vast majority of Nantucket's eighteenth-century population. As Edward Byers argues in *The Nation of Nantucket*, "(t)he government did nothing to nurture in its townsmen the necessity and importance of political participation or the duties and virtues of citizenship."<sup>44</sup> Civic pride came well after both family and meetinghouse in the Quaker community's hierarchy of responsibilities, even though many of the early local officials came from the Quaker meeting. This was in some ways a rejection of the traditional Anglican and Puritan models of civic life found both in England and on mainland Massachusetts. Because marriage was strongly tied to religiosity on Quaker Nantucket, the family unit itself was the embodiment of God's desire for Friends. This not only steered Nantucketers away from local governance but it also helped create a culture of privatism on the island. Byers suggests that "the emphasis on the family, the appearance of equality, and the ascendancy of Quaker culture may have undermined participation in the political process and enhanced the control of the town hierarchy."<sup>45</sup> Byers argues that this was at the expense of a governmental model, that "reliance on the family and accentuation of the individual disaggregated Nantucket society, directing citizens away from their power as a body and toward the gratification of their personal desires."<sup>46</sup> As the authority of the meeting grew throughout the century, particularly during the era of reform, so did the reliance of the family unit as a source of private regulation. The role of the family unit developed in tune with the strength of the meetinghouse from 1708 onward.

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<sup>44</sup> Byers, 198.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Education in Quaker morality came from the home as well as within meeting. Marriage alone could provide not only the academic lessons necessary for future Quaker women and men, but also the moral examples for living a pious life. “It was...the task of Friends to create an environment for children in which they would have the desire and the opportunity to develop into a life of goodness.”<sup>47</sup> In 1762, the women’s meeting set aside at least one member “to take Care of the Children,” or, “oversee the Children” every few months. At the last monthly meeting of that year, the meeting appointed five Friends — Mary Gardner, Deliverance Coleman, Anna Barnard, Elisabeth Starbuck, and Bethiah Pinkham — to care for the meeting’s children.<sup>48</sup> The records of the meeting do not clarify whether this involved providing Quaker education, ensuring children did not disrupt worship service, or providing for the poor. As marriage was essential to sustaining the moral future of the Quaker community on Nantucket, ensuring a moral education through early education was entrusted with mothers, and passed on to both sons and daughters. This included religious lessons, but also more general lessons specific to Quakers, such as the value of silence, pacifism, and speaking Truth. Mothers provided young children their first exposure into what would be expected of them as adult members of a Quaker community. As children grew older, that responsibility would shift from the home to the meeting. But the foundations for future Friends were first built in the home, from one generation to the next.

Marriage on Quaker Nantucket also served a vital economic role. Whaling ruled the island’s financial fortunes in the eighteenth century, with the island becoming the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>48</sup> *Nantucket Women’s Monthly Meetings, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 78.

epicenter of the global whale oil industry by the middle of the century. The absence of marriage eliminated one of the primary public duties of whalers' wives — deputy husbandry. For many whalers, having a wife on the island to handle the affairs of the family's business was beneficial, if not necessary, to preserving personal financial stability. The relationship was mutually beneficial, though. Just as men prospered from having a wife who could handle the affairs of the family's purse strings, both on the island and on the mainland, women enjoyed increased public visibility and a level of equality in business negotiations with other men, at least when their husbands were at sea.

As tryworks — the mechanism for boiling and extracting the blubber and salvaging the oil from sperm whales — found their way onto ships for transport in the 1720s, eliminating the need for whaling ships to carry whale blubber or dock to extract oil from harvested whales, the length those ships could remain at sea increased.<sup>49</sup> With these longer whaling voyages, the responsibility of the family's business and the prestige that came with handling it rested increasingly on wives. This was a role that some women relished. Lucretia Mott cites the abundance of women on Nantucket in the late eighteenth century publicly engaging in business and financial matters, which was usually reserved for men in other communities, as instrumental in forging the "Nantucket woman" and serving as role models for Mott's generation.<sup>50</sup>

Preparing women for this dual responsibility of public moral authority and business practiced publicly required a strong educational system in place. This system existed within the home, where girls received their first instruction. As with boys,

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<sup>49</sup> Byers, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Faulkner, 8-9.

education on Nantucket was established with a pragmatic future in mind — a future that centered on the family unit. “That education was primarily a family affair was the result of the Friends’ concern to transmit their culture and their desire that elementary education be utilitarian and vocational.”<sup>51</sup> For girls, this meant first and foremost learning literacy and numeracy, both to document the business affairs of the women’s meeting and to manage the family’s books in the absence of husbands. Nantucket Quaker women, particularly those who had married whalers, utilized their skills in literacy and numeracy in transacting business and keeping ledgers.<sup>52</sup> Literacy and numeracy also allowed women to keep correspondence from the remote island with others on the mainland, including business associates of the family, as well as maintaining the records and minutes of the self-governing Quaker women’s meeting. Girls also learned mathematics for the same business reason of tending to the books for the family after marrying, during their husbands’ whaling absences. There were some efforts made in educating in the arts, including literary works from the classical age, as well.<sup>53</sup> Those efforts were tertiary to literacy and numeracy, though.

As boys aged, the center of their world would begin to shift from the home and into the maritime community. Both immediate and extended family relations offered opportunities of apprenticeships for young men, both on the island and at sea. Because of

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<sup>51</sup> Byers, 177.

<sup>52</sup> Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 57. Christopher M. Jedrey, *The World of John Cleaveland: Family and Community in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981). Davidson cites Jedrey, who cites one community within Ipswich, Massachusetts where literacy rates grew from around one-quarter of all property owners in the late seventeenth century to almost all male property owners in just under a century, with female literacy rates among property owners at roughly three-quarters. This represents a period of tremendous growth in literacy rates in New England during the eighteenth century, one which would have reflected in Nantucket’s rate, particularly among the island’s more prosperous Friends.

<sup>53</sup> Norling, 83-84.

the expectation for whalers' sons to turn toward a trade connected with the whaling industry, family members would often be called upon to offer vocational training to young men. These apprenticeships could come from both blood relations and family through marriage. On Nantucket, the meeting even took steps to ensure that apprenticeships stayed among Friends. In the 1770s, the meeting became increasingly demanding of its membership regarding proper Quaker education. This was simultaneous to similar efforts put forth by the New England Yearly Meeting to curtail non-Quaker apprenticeships. In 1778, for example, Nathaniel Coffin was disowned by the Nantucket meeting when his son was apprenticed to a non-Quaker.<sup>54</sup> The importance of education is evident in the records of this disownment. The Friends appointed to meet with Coffin "Endeavoured to lay before him the Danger & great Disadvantage that must attend the Education of our Youth."<sup>55</sup>

Disownments did not only make for public fodder and gossip. They served a more holy purpose. Since Friends were seen as having the Inner Light, being the benefactors of Truth, those who had acted in a way that violated the piety of the religious community needed to be publicly removed from the meeting to ensure the reputation of the meeting's purity. Members who did not speak Truth tarnished the meeting and its holy reputation. For example, when a female Friend was disowned, the meeting would publicly record her transgression in meeting. It would then appoint a committee of visitors to meet with her, in the hopes that the transgressor would see the error of her ways. The visitors could meet with that Friend several times before reporting back to the meeting. When the Friend

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<sup>54</sup> Byers, 264.

<sup>55</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1772-1789*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 3, 136.

failed to make satisfaction with the visitors, the women's meeting could vote for disownment. A Friend could be disowned for a variety of offenses. Marital transgressions, including exogamy, bigamy, fornication, and marrying close familial relations could lead to a disownment. Other offenses ranged from acts of violence or theft to attending a wedding or other religious service of a different denomination or being present where there was music and dancing.

Disownments required the expansion of the administration of the women's meeting. In the mid-1760s and into the 1770s, the meeting appointed certain women to visit with those who have committed transgressions, and, in some cases, inform a member of the meeting that she has been disowned. The minutes of meetings where disownment had been decided often included a notation identifying the (usually) two women chosen to offer notification of the meeting's decision. Just as with investigations and visitors, the meeting most often opted to have pairs of women work together to perform this task. Disownments became more commonplace into the 1770s, a result of both a substantial membership and the more stringent discipline that emerged in the 1760s and 1770s. For instance, the minutes of the women's meeting held on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April in 1776 concluded, "Miriam Pinkham & Bethiah Pinkham are appointed to inform Jemima Burnell, Rebekah Bunker & Rhode Russel that they are denied from among friends."<sup>56</sup> When the women's meeting sought to disown one of its own, it would contact the men's meeting, making the disownment a public act of authority and discipline within the Quaker community.

Disownment prevented a Friend from full membership in the Quaker meeting, including the right to have a voice or assume a position of authority within the business

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 151-153.



meeting. It also was akin to civil punishments, as it closed doors for both business and family. As the women's business meeting wielded significant power on the island, this could inhibit a woman's potential for empowerment. But unlike the practice of shunning that takes place in Mennonite and other religious communities, it did not completely alienate the woman from the community. Disowned Friends could even attend Quaker worship services, with the ultimate hope of the transgressor finding Truth and acknowledging her sin, which would open the door for reinstatement into the community at large. One ironic aspect of disownment is that as it became a more common part of Nantucket Quaker discipline, beginning in about 1760, it lost a measure of its power over Friends, with some female Friends even choosing disownment over acknowledging their transgression.

The shift toward more strict discipline in the women's meeting led to changes in the leadership. As the first generations of leaders stepped down from positions of power, new, more reform-minded leaders assumed those positions. The deaths of former meeting clerk and elder Dorcas Gayer Starbuck in 1747 and her sister-in-law and fellow leader Dinah Coffin Starbuck three years later created a void in the meeting.<sup>57</sup> Another former clerk, Mehitable Pollard, and former treasurer Hephzibah Hussey, would step down from their positions of leadership.<sup>58</sup> These changes, from the late 1740s to the early 1760s, paved the way for reformers like Sarah Barney to play a greater role in the discipline of the meeting. This in large part explains the dramatic increase in disownments and harsher discipline of the women's meeting starting in the early 1760s.

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<sup>57</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. VI, 266-272.

<sup>58</sup> Norling, 87.

Disownment was the most severe of public discipline. Most often, the transgressor had the opportunity to admit wrongdoing to the meeting and avoid being disowned. The only recorded discipline during this period on Nantucket came in the form of disownments, meetings with visitors who would “treat” with the transgressor in the hopes of receiving an acknowledgment of guilt, and public readings of wrongdoing in meeting, which were recorded in the minutes. Nantucket Friends sought to avoid the need for disownment by creating a culture of education, found within the meeting and in the home. Family connections among Friends were meant to provide ample opportunities of educating children within Quaker precepts. To the meeting, there was no need to extend beyond Friends to find a suitable apprenticeship for a boy of age. On Nantucket, this was particularly important, as it cemented the links between Quakerism and the whaling industry. It was necessary that Quaker education for boys be comprehensive, guiding both the moral and vocational futures of young Friends. An example of what could happen when Quaker education was ignored can be found in 1777, when William Barnard was disciplined by the Nantucket meeting, a challenge to those who were members of the meeting by birthright. The reforms of the 1760s and 1770s called into question Friends whose membership came solely through birthright.

In Barnard’s case, despite being Quaker by virtue of being the son of the late Timothy Barnard, he, “had not his education agreeable thereto yet.”<sup>59</sup> It was Barnard’s “nominal membership among” Friends that led him down the path of unruly behavior, specifically for falling “into Quarreling,” as well as later illegally taking into possession a

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<sup>59</sup> *Nantucket Men’s Monthly Meeting, 1772-1789*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 3, 123.

ship headed from England to America, for which the meeting disciplined him.<sup>60</sup> The blame for Barnard's transgressions fell on his lack of Quaker education, exacerbated by his "nominal" membership.

Quaker marriage not only served to provide for the moral and vocational education for future generations but it could also connect wealthy and powerful families, creating strong alliances and large extended families that wielded great power over the community. A prime example of this was the uniting of the Starbuck and Macy families. Both clans dated back to among the earliest English settlers on Nantucket. When Jabez Macy wed Sarah Starbuck in 1712, the proprietary and early whaling families on the island united.<sup>61</sup> The couple would ascend the hierarchy of the meeting, becoming among its most powerful members. In 1718, Jabez Macy received money from the meeting to explore the building of a meetinghouse, he being entrusted with this important task for the growing community.<sup>62</sup> This relationship between Jabez Macy and the meeting would eventually sour with his disownment at the beginning of the 1760s at the age of 77 over a disagreement with the meeting. That disagreement stemmed from a controversy regarding some Nantucketers overstocking the public commons with their own sheep. Prior to this disownment, though, the couple had raised nine children in the Quaker tradition. Six had married in meeting, and the family produced twenty-six grandchildren, despite three of the nine children never marrying.<sup>63</sup> Even with Jabez's disownment late in

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. V, 96-97, 164.

<sup>62</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Eliza Starbuck Barney Genealogical Record, available online from the Nantucket Historical Association, [www.nha.org](http://www.nha.org)

life, it was the family's Quaker dedication to marriage during their prime child rearing years that continued this powerful economic and religious union. In the 1720s and 1730s, Sarah Macy had investigated marriages for the women's meeting, partnering with Dorcas Starbuck and Experience Coffin.<sup>64</sup>

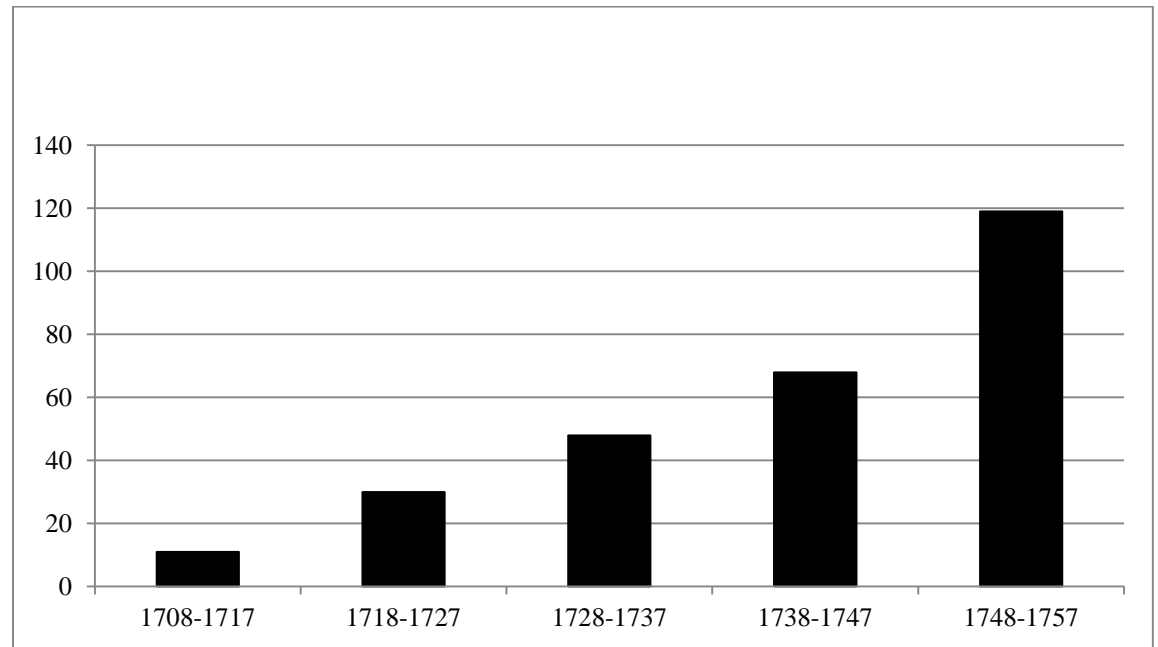
With marriage and the young family being crucial to Nantucket's religious, moral, and economic well-being, only those who would adhere to the dictates of Christian love in Quaker marriage could ascend to positions of leadership within the community. The investigation of potential brides was a vital responsibility for the women's meeting in ensuring children would be raised within the precepts of the religious community. The Religious Society of Friends was the only denomination that afforded women full power to investigate and rule on the worthiness of potential brides. The fate of potential families could be determined by the approval or disapproval of the meeting, and in particular the female overseers. For Dorcas Gayer Starbuck and Priscilla Starbuck Coleman to have such faith placed on their shoulders suggests just how much trust the meeting placed in both of them. Dorcas Gayer married Nathaniel Starbuck's brother, Jethro — who happened to outlive her by twenty-three years, reaching the age of 98. And Priscilla Starbuck Coleman was Nathaniel's sister. The relation of these two women to early men's meeting elder Nathaniel Starbuck probably proved vital to them achieving such positions of authority within the women's meeting. Yet, for Priscilla and Nathaniel, true power within the Quaker meeting came from their mother, Mary Coffin Starbuck, whose conversion to Quakerism at the beginning of the eighteenth century led to the wave of

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<sup>64</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meetings, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 17, 29.

conversions that made Nantucket fertile ground for the spread of the denomination over the course of the eighteenth century.

Table 1: Marriage petitions to the Nantucket Quaker Women's Monthly Meeting by decade, 1708-1757



This family dynamic within Quaker meetings, as evidenced on Nantucket, created a form of tribalism within the community. Rather than this being evidence of nepotism, or exalted status solely through familial connections, there was a belief in the heightened religiosity of children raised by pious Quakers. Those who were raised in devout Quaker households had the advantage of moral education from a young age. This is the great advantage from which the children and grandchildren of prominent Nantucket Quakers like Mary Coffin Starbuck benefited. Their positions of prominence within the meeting came from the belief in the piety of Quaker families, and the nurturing environment in which Friends raised their children. The greater the prominence of the family was within the meeting, the greater the public expectation within the community of the piety of children who were raised in such a home. Prominence in the community was also an

important part of maintaining a holy Quaker family. Wealth provided greater opportunity to ensure holiness in the home, as a Quaker family of means could ensure children apprenticed with Friends, while poverty could limit the family from providing the most pious home possible.

The meeting's leaders, its elders, overseers, and visitors, came from families committed to such piety. In eighteenth-century meetings, investigating the clearness of prospective brides was a primary task the leadership of the women's meeting performed. The practice of women declaring their intentions to marry before their peers in open meeting came from George Fox as early as 1670.<sup>65</sup> As the Quaker community on Nantucket increased in size and prominence into the middle and later eighteenth century, the role of investigating prospective brides would become increasingly important and visible. The fifth decade of the meeting's existence, from 1748-57, oversaw more weddings than the meeting's first three decades (1708-1737) combined (See Graph 1). With this increase in the number of weddings within the meeting, the desire to maintain harmony and Truth within marriage placed tremendous importance on the institution. It was the flip side of the coin, providing for the domestic, private side of what could only be communally monitored in public. As such, the Quaker community could only be as strong as the families that made up the meeting and the families could be strong only insofar as the meeting was vigorous and intrusive. This led to a stringent process and rules by which a couple could marry, forcing the meeting to do its due diligence in monitoring prospective marriages, and keeping the peace once a couple had married. Because of this important role marriage took in the community, there are several questions worth exploring, beyond the matter of how important marriage was to the

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<sup>65</sup> Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, 79.

moral, educational, and economic future of Nantucket. For instance, how did a couple go through the process of marrying? What did an ordinary eighteenth-century Quaker wedding ceremony look like? How were such marriages documented? Finally, in what ways did such rites prepare a couple for a long and happy life together? These were vital issues to this community and public women played a central role in each issue and answer.

The first question, regarding the process of marrying, revolves around the Nantucket Quakers' conviction that marriage was a religious institution. Quakers saw the family, next to the meeting house, as the center of faith. This gave marriage a particular importance that could not be diminished by making it civil (often in the hands of those who, in the opinion of Friends, had not received the Light, such as Massachusetts Puritans) or secular (according to Friends, outside of the spirit of the Inner Light entirely).<sup>66</sup> To preserve the sanctity of Friends, marriages took place entirely within the Quaker community. Couples were first expected to arrive at their decision to join as husband and wife of their own accord, "falling in love by their own inner witness."<sup>67</sup> The couple arriving at the unified conclusion to take such a major step, "never by arrangement, much less coercion,"<sup>68</sup> indicates that such a serious religious step could not be taken for personal or family gain, or out of political or economic opportunity. Even as the potential for family wealth and power is evident in the uniting of the Macys with the Starbucks (and with them, the Coffins), that could never be the reason to enter into a

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<sup>66</sup> The Inner, or Inward, Light has its Quaker roots with George Fox, who spoke of, "that inward light, Spirit, and grace, by which all might know their salvation." George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox: Being an Historical Account of His Life, Travels, Sufferings, and Christian Experiences* (London, 1902), in Thomas D. Hamm, ed., *Quaker Writings: An Anthology, 1650-1920* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 16.

<sup>67</sup> Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, 73.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Quaker marriage based on Truth. Couples would have to both share a similar love, a desire to spiritualize that love in the establishment of a new family. Only through marriage could spiritual love and the Inner Light extend to both house — including meetinghouse — and home, reflected in the shared role of spiritual nurturing and education. Still, Friends took great pains to delineate between love and lust. Even though love and the unified desire to marry could often be in reality based as much in mutual lust as it was in emotional sentiments, such sinful desires could not be the reason for wedlock.

Attempts to maintain distance between lust and love were at the foundation of George Fox's theological arguments regarding marriage, but with some eye toward the realistic and practical. "Although he inveighed against lust in marriage, Fox and his allies were purposefully quiet about what form conjugal sexuality might take."<sup>69</sup> Levy points out how critics of early Quakerism — of which there were many — as well as those who left the care of Friends, believed most Quaker couples seeking marriage were more directed by their lustful desires than their Inner Light.<sup>70</sup> Any sacrifice to Foxian tenets of pure love threatened the very institution of marriage on Nantucket, and could lead to the fall of its place as a guiding force for future Friends.

Whether driven by spiritual or physical callings, once a couple arrived at the conclusion that marriage was the right step, it was required they consult with elders from their meeting. If the couple were from separate meetings, elders from both meetings were asked to consult with them. The elders served as a first line of defense, for both the couple and the meeting(s). They could deliberate with both woman and man, determining the sincerity of each partner's desire to marry. This also served as an opportunity to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 73.



address any potential problems that might arise later, and to have those problems handled in a more private venue. Once a couple declared their intentions in open meeting, the door opened to any obstacle in the couple's way, such as an unwanted pregnancy or a lack of consent from one set of parents, being aired in public. With regard to the objection of parents, there were attempts to reconcile differences before a couple publicly declared their intentions. From the sheer number of marriages, the requirement that living parents consent to a child's marriage, and the relative absence of instances of parents refusing to consent, it could be inferred that issues of disapproval were generally addressed before a couple ever presented their intentions to the meeting. Elders could also steer the couple in the right direction toward the proper way to declare their intentions, and how to avoid any obstacles that had plagued other couples. Since couples who approached elders seeking advice were in the early stages of engagement, this was the time for any remaining potential problems to be handled. The meeting minutes do not reflect how many potential marriages were terminated before even a declaration of intentions on the advice of elders at this stage, as the records only identify marriages at the point of declaration before the meeting.

If a couple would declare the first intention to marry in an open meeting, it was expected that this came only after receiving the blessing of the meeting's elders. The public declarations would often come in worship meetings, which were attended by both men and women, with accompanying declarations to the women's and men's business meetings. At that point, the couple came under the scrutiny of the entire Quaker community for the first time. Lingering issues that had not been resolved by the elders could come to the surface, such as a lack of parental consent. As Margaret Hope Bacon

states in *Mothers of Feminism*, “(y)oung Quakers were free to choose their own mates, and although parents might exercise a veto, the meeting could overrule them if a committee found the reasons for parental objections were arbitrary.”<sup>71</sup> In instances where two different meetings were represented, or where geographical distance was a factor, written consent from parents could replace in-person verbal consent. For instance, in 1739:

This Meeting received a few lines from Preserved Fish & Ruth, his Wife, Shewing their free Consent that their Son Benjamin Should proceed in Marriage with Priscilla Arthur and likewise a Certificate from the Monthly Meeting of Friends held at Newport the 25.7 mo. 1739 Shewing his clearness on acco’t. of Marriage & orderly Conversation.<sup>72</sup>

There were several instances of parental consent given in writing in lieu of in-person declarations, such as with Stephen Gorham, whose consent was noted in the records of the meeting in 1727. “This meeting recieved a few lines from Stephen Gorham Shewing his & his wiffe’s Concent to their Daughter Susanna’s proceeding to Marriage with Daniel Paddack.”<sup>73</sup> At the ninth monthly meeting (November) in 1735, “This Meeting received a few lines sign’d by Benjamin Hoeg (?) Shewing his Consent that Thomas Barnard Should marry with his Daughter, Benjamin Barney & Barnabas Gardner are Desired to attend the above Reuben Gardner & Thomas Barnards Marriages to See that there be no Disorder &c.”<sup>74</sup> For some children, mothers performed the task of verifying parental approval in the absence of fathers, which gave women in the

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<sup>71</sup> Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 56.

<sup>72</sup> *Nantucket Men’s Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 21.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

community considerable authority over their children. Mothers would be the only parents with sufficient information to make a decision on the marital fate of a child if a father was at sea, and away from home, for up to two years.

As the connections between the communities of Newport and Nantucket grew, marriages uniting the two cities became more common. For parents of Newport meeting members seeking to marry into the Nantucket community, written permission would serve as well as personal testimony of consent. “This meeting received an Epistle from the Monthly Meeting held at Newport the 9.12mo 1737 concerning or Shewing James Mitchel clearness from any intanglement concerning marriage among them & orderly Conversation &c. & likewise from Elizabeth Wood Shewing her Consent that her Son James Mitchel Should Marry with Anna Folger.”<sup>75</sup> This was also the case for those from other Quaker meetings regulated by the New England Yearly Meeting. Letters of consent, or the personal granting of consent during open meeting, could serve to ensure a family from outside the Nantucket Monthly Meeting approved of the marriage. Through this safeguard for parents, the stewardship of their children continued into that son’s or daughter’s adulthood.

For some Friends, the public nature of the marriage announcement could deter them from marrying within meeting. In 1771, William Worth faced the discipline of the meeting for marrying out of order. This was not connected to the marrying of a non-Quaker. Rather, Worth’s wife, who was a Friend, had a speech impediment, and the couple had concerns that the public nature of Quaker marriage, including the proclamations of intent before the meeting, would be difficult for her. Worth “acknowledged having married a Friend, but out of meeting because She having a natural

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

impediment in speaking to such a degree as made her think it would not be possible for her to go through with the several public declarations she must have to make pertaining to that way of marriage.”<sup>76</sup> This is an indication of how the procedure and regulation of marriage was a public forum, one that could prove too intimidating for those not accustomed to, or comfortable with, public speech.

This thorough bureaucracy for marriage was in sharp contrast to Puritan marital practices of the eighteenth century. Requirements for Puritan marriage involved a public posting of the marriage. There was no other necessary mechanism for parental approval. In some instances, parents were not even made aware of the impending marriage of their offspring. Minister Ebenezer Parkman of Westborough met a woman his son, Ebenezer, Jr., was courting in 1751. A few months later, the younger Ebenezer dined with his father the day after having married the woman, Elizabeth Harrington. Not only had the minister not been asked his approval of the wedding, he did not even know of the engagement. This did not have a detrimental impact on the minister’s views of his daughter-in-law, or his joy over the nuptials.<sup>77</sup> His acceptance of the marriage suggests his lack of knowledge of the wedding was not necessarily unusual. Though a lack of knowledge or approval may not have been the norm in Puritan communities throughout most of the eighteenth century, such a cavalier attitude toward parental involvement in this Puritan marriage was quite different from Quaker expectations of parental knowledge and consent, and communal participation and oversight of the wedding ceremony.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>77</sup> Barry Levy, *Town Born: The Political Economy of New England from Its Founding to the Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 265-266.

The commitment of the meeting of time and effort to ensure parental consent demonstrates the importance of the family within the community. Harmony was the ideal, and any disharmony at the onset of a marriage, the creation of a new family, would have repercussions not only for the family but also for the entire meeting. The flow of the Holy Spirit would be blocked. It also served as yet another check to ensure the suitability of a partner. The elders of the meeting that met with prospective couples could offer one check, and the public declaration within meeting would also provide another check, as any Friend in attendance could voice support or opposition to the marriage, but the parents could offer greater insight into the partners. If parents approved, it was likely they were placing their offspring in good hands. These notes from parents also served as references for their own children. In some instances, widows would be asked to offer their consent to the men's business meeting, serving as the sole parental authority. In 1762, for instance, Mary Greene Barney wrote to the men's meeting giving permission for her son, Jonathan, to marry Abigail Jenkins.<sup>78</sup> This was consistent with the meeting's desire to ensure the harmony of the family in the decision of the betrothed. When a father was deceased, the power to authorize a child, even a son, to marry could be passed to the mother. Prior to a marriage, the meeting sought to gather as much information as possible on spouses from family members and others who knew them well, especially when someone outside the community was seeking to marry into it. This was the means by which the meeting could ensure that only those whose presence within the community would benefit it would be welcomed.

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<sup>78</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 169.

In the case of Nantucket, written consent from parents was essential for those who married someone not from the island. The harsh waters around Nantucket and dangerous weather could isolate the island from outsiders. Just as written certificates proved quite useful for allowing traveling ministers to journey from meeting to meeting, written parental consent was vital when a father (or mother) could not offer consent in person. This was a step expected among Quakers, but it was often not necessary in Puritan communities. Parental approval was ultimately a more rigorous process for Quakers than it was for Puritans, as well as being an expectation among Friends not found in Puritan communities.

The 1753 Marriage Act established guidelines for the parental right of refusal on marriage. This legislation, also called Lord Hardwicke's Act after the Lord Chancellor, called for the posting of banns to announce a marriage three weeks before the wedding could take place. It also established a legal marriage age, 21, at which couples did not need parental consent before marrying, and dictated the announcement of the banns and the holding of the ceremonies in Anglican churches. This act was an attempt to clamp down on clandestine marriages. Active parental consent was not required, but parents could raise objections during the three-week period. Because there was no stipulation on ceremonies being held at a family's home parish, a couple seeking to escape parental refusal could have the bann posted and announced and the ceremony held at a church removed from either family's home town. The law impacted Puritan marriage, but an exemption for Friends kept it from impacting the Nantucket meeting.

Receiving parental permission, written or in meeting, early in the process of investigation hastened the time frame by which a couple could marry, allowing the

investigation of the meeting to continue without delay. On an island where the call of the sea would occasionally expedite marriages, such written consents from parents allowed couples to move ahead before a groom would head back to sea. These documents also offered the meeting yet another piece of evidence in determining the worthiness of a potential new member to the monthly meeting, satisfying the steps an insular meeting like Nantucket took to preserving its well-being. It was not common that a parent would offer a negative reference regarding their offspring, and even less likely that person would present such a negative statement to the meeting. Nevertheless, the positive report of parents regarding not only their offspring but those whom they would welcome into their own families could only help the meeting preserve its standards for inclusion.

Once the blessing of the family was assured and the couple had made it through both speaking with elders and the initial declaration of intention, the process was hardly over. Indeed, it had just begun. An official investigation by both the women's and men's meetings would take place. The men's meeting investigated the groom, the women's meeting the bride. In most instances, the couple would present its intentions at one month's meetings, and would receive a response from the investigation at the meetings of the next month. For the women's meeting, in the first half-century of regulating marriages, between the first marriages in 1709 until 1760, more than 300 couples appeared before the meeting to declare their intent to marry. The permission of the meeting was rarely delayed beyond the next month's meeting, and in exceptional circumstances a couple would receive permission in the same month it first petitioned the meeting for clearness.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meetings, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10.

After the month-long investigations of the men's and women's meetings had been concluded, the couple would return to both the men's and women's meetings to reaffirm their desire to marry and to receive the meeting's verdict on their suitability to marry each other. This was the final obstacle for the couple before receiving the full blessing of the meeting at large. Any lingering issues, such as lapses in good behavior, previous marriages or engagements, disputes from either family, or premarital pregnancies, would most often be dealt with before reaching this stage. Conflict resolution was handled outside of meeting, outside of the open minutes, and prior to couples reaffirming their intentions. This was consistent with the desire of Friends to maintain Truth in all conversations, private and public. To avoid the appearance of lapses in Truth, Friends generally used vague language regarding transgressions, particularly before Quaker reforms impacted the Nantucket meeting.

If there had been nothing of concern in the investigation, this second declaration could be made a month after the first, or sooner in rare instances. However, if the investigation had found a lingering issue, the process could be delayed for months while it was resolved. Most often, by the time a couple was ready to declare their intentions again, it was with complete harmony of the meeting. Of the more than 300 marriages investigated by the meeting in its first half-century, twenty-one were delayed. Fourteen were delayed two months, three were delayed three months, two were delayed four months, and two were delayed five months.<sup>80</sup> Two marriages benefited from expedited investigations, including the marriage of Christopher Worth to Dinah Paddack, whose investigation received the approval of the women's meeting in eighteen days. The

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



women's meeting conducted a quick investigation for the couple because the groom was "a seafaring man & on his passage from boston."<sup>81</sup>

There were exceptions, though. On rare occasion, a couple would declare their intentions a second time, be declared as clear, but not quite have the unanimous support of all Friends. For example, in 1721, Abigail Folger and Daniel Folger, first cousins once removed, reached the point of reaffirming their intentions of marriage. According to the minutes of the men's meeting, "Daniel Folger & Abigail Folger appeared before this meeting declaring the continuation of their intentions of marriage – friends having deliberated considered the matter do in Condecention tolerate & permitt them to proceed they being ney of kin."<sup>82</sup> The investigators from the women's meeting, Experience Coffin and Sarah Barnard, reported back to the women's meeting that they were clear for marriage, this relationship notwithstanding, and the couple was "permitted to proceed tho not in full unity of friends."<sup>83</sup> Despite the lack of full unity, the couple did marry, though, on the thirty-first day of the sixth month (August) in 1721, although even in the marriage records, it is noted that the couple did not marry in full unity of Friends.<sup>84</sup> More often than not, any such disunity in meeting had been reconciled before a couple reached its wedding day.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>82</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 31.

<sup>83</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meetings, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 11.

<sup>84</sup> *A Book of Records of the Certificates of Friends Marriages on the Island of Nantucket, by Order of the Meeting of Friends of Said Island, 1708-1755*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 15, 21.

Couples that made it past the stage of second declarations in front of both business meetings, having received the approval of the meetings, would take that final step of a wedding in meeting. The ceremony of the wedding itself on Quaker Nantucket was considered sacred and of central importance, a far cry from Puritan indifference to the wedding ceremony beyond that it occur before a magistrate or a recognized clergyman. For Quaker couples where one partner was not from the meeting where the wedding was taking place, official visitors from that partner's meeting would often attend the ceremony. This was to ensure the ceremony was handled properly, according to the rules established by the yearly and quarterly governing bodies. Nantucket's governing body, the New England Yearly Meeting, based in Newport, established regulations for conduct at wedding ceremonies. Each meeting at times took more strict or lenient interpretations of those guidelines, but the discipline of the yearly meeting gave individual meetings the basis for its own regulations.

In 1718, when Samuel Barker and Bethiah Folger married, Barker had a letter of clearness from the meeting at Newport. The couple was not only previously separated by geography but also by age, as she was all of twenty-six, and he was a fifty-five-year-old widower.<sup>85</sup> Yet, when investigating her, the women's meeting states, "Priscilla Coleman & Sarah Barnard are appointed to inquire into the womans Clearness & to Returne their answers to our next Monthly Meeting where the young Couple are to give their attendance."<sup>86</sup> Referring to them as a "young Couple" would suggest the term was used fairly universally, regardless of the age of the two seeking to marry. The marriage itself took place at his meeting, despite that afterward, he would transfer his membership to the

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<sup>85</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. V, 176.

<sup>86</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meetings*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 7-8.

Nantucket meeting. With the ceremony set for his meeting in Newport, Nantucket sent representatives to witness the occasion, despite the trip by sea (68 nautical miles, if sailing north of Martha's Vineyard) taking a full day each way. "Jethro Starbuck and Stephen Coffin, Jr., are appointed to attend their marriage & see that it be decently performed."<sup>87</sup> The New England Yearly Meeting governed what it meant for a marriage to be "decently performed," although each meeting also had some level of its own standards. The document establishing such standards for the New England Yearly Meeting, the *Ancient Epistles Minutes and Advices, 1672-1735*, served as the guide for all proper behavior of Friends, including but not limited to the proper form for a Quaker wedding ceremony. As the wedding day would be the commencement of a marriage, ensuring Quaker morality in the ceremony was an important first step for the couple.

The standards set forth by Friends regulating the performance of a marriage included several factors, not the least was ensuring the ceremony was indeed conducted by Quakers in meeting. On the Puritan mainland, it was of even greater importance to ensure the ceremony did not suffer from non-Quaker influence. Similar to regular meetings for worship, there was expected to be no officiant. A couple did not require a third party, such as a priest, to declare them married. Only God had the authority to declare a couple wed. This was a similar theological argument made by George Fox and other early Quakers against having formal liturgy or a minister overseeing worship. There was no liturgy for how a marriage was to be conducted, nor were those who served as elders or traveling ministers instilled with any particular power over conducting a wedding ceremony. The couple sat before the witnesses as equals, all involved truly

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<sup>87</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 22-23.

being equal under God. This demonstration of Quaker equality before God provided a religious foundation for the continuation of the community, which was of vital importance to Nantucket Quakers. Maintaining the island as a Quaker haven was paramount to ensuring the moral and economic foundation for a community that sustained itself through whaling. On an island where so many spouses were so often geographically separated for years, and together for just a few months before returning to the sea, marriage was the one institution which provided the cement that allowed its men, women, and children to survive such a difficult lifestyle and continue it for future generations.

Wedding ceremonies, as well as other forms of Quaker worship, valued the sanctity of silence. Friends would sit in silence at the onset of the ceremony, with the couple sitting in front of the rest of the meeting. The first to speak were usually the groom or bride, who would offer their promises to each other. Friends did not take oaths or vows, nor did they swear anything before God, as it was the belief that Friends always had the Inner Light and always spoke Truth. There was no need to differentiate between when they were swearing an oath to be honest, and when they were under no such obligation. Instead of a vow or oath, a couple would make a declaration before the meeting of promises to their partner for the life ahead of them. The meeting recorded the full text of these promises in *A Book of Records of the Certificates of Friends Marriages on the Island of Nantucket, by Order of the Meeting of Friends of Said Island*. As was the case in most religious and business matters for Quaker meetings in the eighteenth century, clerks documented these marriages in great detail. These records included an account of both parties, identifying them by their name and by their father. For instance,

the 1716 marriage between Jethro Gardner and Kezia Folger identifies both parties by their father, as was often the case in both wedding certificates and meeting minutes. Jethro is listed as “the Son of James Gardner of Nantucket,” and Kezia is “the Daughter of Peter Folger (Deceased) of Said Island of Nantucket.”<sup>88</sup> It was also noted that the couple had the consent of all living parents.

After sitting in the requisite silence, the man would take the woman by the hand “in a Solemn Manner” and recite his promise to her. Jethro Gardner told his soon-to-be-bride, and the witnesses from the meeting, “Friends, in the fear of the Lord, & in the Presence of this Assembly, I take my Friend Kezia Folger to be my wife Promising by the Lords Assistance to be unto her a Loving Husband.”<sup>89</sup> The woman’s promise used similar language, with only the words “wife” and “husband” interchanged from Jethro Gardner’s promise. This was typical language for such promises, although in many cases, “Till Death Shall Seperate Us” was included as a postlude. Each of the seven marriage certificates prior to that of Jethro Gardner and Kezia Folger included those five words. Over time, there were minor changes to the wording, such as including “kind,” “tender,” “loving,” or “faithful,” as adjectives to describe the attributes as a spouse they promised to demonstrate. For a ceremony that was intended to serve as an expression of true Christian love and sincerity, the formulaic nature of these statements suggest the meeting controlled every aspect of the ceremony, preserving Truth through the lens of the meeting.

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<sup>88</sup> *A Book of Records of the Certificates of Friends Marriages on the Island of Nantucket, by Order of the Meeting of Friends of Said Island, 1708-1755*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 15, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

To ensure the couple lived up to the promises made to each other, and to attest the wedding was conducted properly according to the regulations of the yearly meeting and the local monthly meeting; witnesses would sign the bottom of the marriage certificate. Men would sign on the left, and women on the right, similar to how worship meetings were segregated by gender — and how the meetinghouse on Nantucket was structured, with men on the left, women on the right, and a partition dividing the two sides for meetings. The signings would come at the end of the service, and only after the couple themselves had signed.

By the time the couple had already made promises to each other, the vetting process had been completed, and the couple was married according to Friends. This is evidenced in the signing into the records the witnesses of the wedding. Any opportunity for those with objections to the union had already passed, and the Quaker desire for harmony ruled the occasion. In those cases where there were objections from others in the community, or from parents who were not as eager to give their assent, the meeting addressed concerns outside of public view, often with the watchful guidance of elders or visitors. An example of this is in 1773, when Elizabeth Wing approached the women's meeting to marry Robert Hussey. She did not have parental consent, which caused her investigators from the women's meeting to intervene. It was only after Wing presented to the meeting parental consent that the couple was permitted to proceed.<sup>90</sup> Upon marrying, the meeting clerk would draft a certificate, which the witnesses would sign. An example of the statement preceding the signatures would read:

we whose names are hereunto subscribed, being Present among  
others at the Solemnizing of their said Marriage, & Subscription

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<sup>90</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meetings*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 128.

aforesaid, as Witnesses hereunto, have also to these presents  
Subscribed our names, the day & year above written.<sup>91</sup>

The act of witnessing a wedding was important to the future marriage was important on several levels. It gave witnesses from both meetings the opportunity to ensure a proper Quaker ceremony, and, if necessary, reconcile differences between individual meetings or yearly meeting jurisdictions. By their presence, witnesses also made the community accountable for the newly established family. Those who witnessed the wedding accepted a level of responsibility that the couple was both physically and spiritually prepared for such a union. It established the wedding, the creation of a new family unit, as both a religious and a communal event. Once the couple and the witnesses signed the certificate, it was recorded with the others from previous Quaker marriages. The couple would receive a copy of it, as well.

Quaker guidelines against music and dancing made for subdued wedding celebrations after the ceremony had completed, especially compared to the noisy affairs of other Christian faiths. Being present at the playing of music could be a punishable offense to Friends. In 1774, the meeting disowned Eunice Worth for “frequenting Places of Devertion where Fiddling & Dancing was Carri’d On.”<sup>92</sup> Likewise, Jemima Burnell faced the judgment of the women’s meeting in 1776 for, “being at a place where music & Dancing was carried on & she a partaker therewith.”<sup>93</sup> Admonition in meeting went beyond restrictions on dancing or music. Disownment and other discipline for public drunkenness— such as the fate that befell Shubael Coffin in 1731 — assured that even at

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 150-151.

times of joy, Nantucket's Quakers would maintain the modesty and integrity expected from the meeting.<sup>94</sup> Often after Quaker weddings, "(a) supper was organized for the families and close friends."<sup>95</sup>

These regulations clearly set the Quaker meeting apart from the more festive celebrations found on the mainland after marriages in other Protestant denominations. Puritan weddings, for example, could be long affairs that included much celebration. Joshua Hempstead recounts, for example, one wedding on August 22, 1729. "I was at Madm Winthrops most of the day with Joseph Wanton of Newport was married to Ms Molly Winthrop last night & the wedding was held all day & at night."<sup>96</sup> The wedding of his daughter, on September 1, 1731, in New London, Connecticut, was similarly raucous, continuing late into the evening.

I was at home most of the day at the Church meeting, in the Evening my Daughter Abigail Married to Clement Minor of Stonington A great number, of People Every Room & Chamber full, Thursd 2d fair. I was about home all day. the People came again in the afternoon but few besides the young ones, they broke up Sooner than Last night about 11 Clock.<sup>97</sup>

In Friends' desire to maintain a separate identity from the other sects, such rules allowed for that division. Beyond the desire to maintain its numbers and ensure children grew up in completely Quaker homes, regulations against interfaith marriages also prevented the profane celebrations of Congregationalist and Anglican weddings from impacting Quaker modesty. Notions of the community and a common simplicity trumped the celebratory

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<sup>94</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. V, 54-55.

<sup>95</sup> David Hackett Fisher, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 488-489.

<sup>96</sup> Joshua Hempstead, *Diary of Joshua Hempstead, 1711-1758* (New London, Conn.: New London County Historical Society, 1901), 211.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.



atmosphere of a wedding. For Quakers, starting a family and being solid members of the religious community were of greater immediate importance than the immodesty of a celebration. The wedding served as only the beginning of the meeting's oversight of the couple, as visitations from elders and frequent advice provided a path for the new couple to follow in creating a pious Quaker family.

Women served as the public defenders of family morality, ensuring that all who belonged to the powerful women's meeting adhered to the guidelines of behavior and familial harmony established by the meeting. Quakerism from the time of George Fox and Margaret Fell had taken a position toward gender relations that was seen a radical to other denominations, one in which women were permitted, and even expected, to speak and have a role in both the public and private regulation of morality. This provided one part of the foundation for outspoken female reformers, but there was considerably more to that foundation. Quaker women on Nantucket did not become reformers because of the liberal nature of Friends as much as they did because of the public authority placed in the hands of women to ensure morality. The restrictions of the meeting gave women a basis for authority, one that they would carry with them to anti-slavery conventions and to Seneca Falls, and later to suffragist organizations. The power women had over other women by adhering to Quaker moral standards was the opportunity needed to become public advocates for moral causes. Elders ruling in the meeting on cases of fornication, incest, endogamy, and bigamy progressed into women publicly advocating for the end of slavery and the granting of voting rights to women. This could only come from within a religious community that allowed for women to ensure the harmony of marriage and the

family by granting them the power to self-govern and essentially the responsibility to oversee community morality.

How did the process leading up to a wedding, the wedding ceremony itself, and the adherence to modesty and simplicity prepare a couple for a long and happy marriage, as well as a stronger reliance on both the family and the community? Each part of the process served some role in protecting both the couple and the meeting from disharmony. The couple's initial decision to meet with the meeting elders allowed for some of the meeting's most respected members to offer advice to the couple, as well as to ensure that this union would be in the harmony of the meeting. From there, the declaration before both business meetings made the community as a whole aware of the couple's intentions. This would help avoid disputes from within the community from arising later in the process. The investigation would ensure both partners were clear of all others, as well as having the capacity to maintain the harmony of the family unit. And the second declaration before meeting verified to the entire community that the couple had gone through the process properly, and was prepared to take that final step toward establishing a new family on the island and within the meeting.

On the day of the wedding, the couple sitting before the witnesses ensured that the ceremony took place as specified by the New England Yearly Meeting and the monthly meeting's own stipulations. The absence of formal liturgy suggested that the couple could only be married by God, and of their own volition. No third party had the right to marry them. Silence was a key component of eighteenth-century Quaker worship, as it was through silence that one could receive the Inner Light. The couple taking nearly identical vows demonstrated the relative equality valued, at least publicly, among Quakers. This

would help establish Nantucket wives of whalers as deputy husbands, or nearly equal partners, in business transactions.<sup>98</sup> Marriage was the first among many moral acts a Nantucket Quaker woman performed. Testimonials from witnesses welcomed the couple as a new family into the community. The importance of family in the community made such acceptance vital to the couple's future on the island. As the Quaker community grew in the early and mid-eighteenth century, many witnesses listed at the bottom of marriage certificates were family members of one of the two partners. Finally, the decision to keep the marriage within meeting or bring a copy of the certificate to local officials established the acceptance or rejection of civil authority.

Couples became a part of the community at large, assuming roles within the meeting, either on committees or as elders, after a sufficient period of time. With marriage came a new beginning, and with it certain expectations. More sober deportment seems to have been one expectation of the community toward its married members, a task the meeting enforced in its practice of visitation. Crèvecoeur speaks of men, once married, being required to practice "more solid behavior and deportment," while women were expected to follow "in the trammels of Custom."<sup>99</sup> Marriage was not only a time of beginning, the entrance of a new familial unit into the community, but it also was the passing of the more "cheerful and gay" days of youth preceding marriage.<sup>100</sup> Beyond adhering to Quaker simplicity and expected sober deportment, bearing children who would continue speaking Truth on the island was also essential. Those children were

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<sup>98</sup> Norling, 36.

<sup>99</sup> J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer* (Garden City, N.Y.: Dolphin Books, 1963), 153.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

expected to carry on not just the faith of their parents, but in many cases their professions. Sons of whalers would find themselves apprenticed on ships in their teens — often years before they were expected to put childhood aside by marrying. Daughters assumed the role of handling the personal economy of the family in the absence of their husbands once they married. This would be a perpetuation of the Quaker religious and economic model built over the course of the eighteenth century.

The family unit centered in marriage was the primary means for Quakers on Nantucket to ensure future generations of Friends would be raised according to the moral dictates of the Society. Other groups might pay lip service to the centrality of the family, but the Quaker marriage discipline and its applications shows that the Nantucket Quakers worked hard to give the conjugal household enormous responsibility and power. The continuation of education within the home taught girls the skills necessary for handling the business affairs for the family. This was particularly important on an island where whaling could lead to the absence of men for months or years at a time. For boys, apprenticeships taught the necessary skills to attain wealth in a whaling community. Connections through the family, either through blood or by marriage, served as the network for apprenticeships. Friends took great steps to keep this apprenticeship system internally Quaker, even disciplining those members who branched outside of the religious community to apprentice their children. Marriage also united powerful families, creating familial alliances that could assert much greater power as a unified force than working against each other. For those reasons, marriage was treated with the utmost importance on Nantucket. The procedure for ensuring sound, harmonious, and productive marriage was extensive and exhaustive, by design. From the declaration of a couple's intent to

marry, to the investigative process for both partners, to the permission of parents, to the assent of the meeting in allowing for the marriage, to even the oversight of the wedding itself to ensure it was conducted according to Quaker solemnity, marriage was a serious endeavor worthy of such scrutiny. The role of the women's meeting in this process, including the investigation of potential brides, provided Quaker women a unique role among their contemporaries. Regulations on marriage included prohibiting exogamous marriage, marrying too close to kin, bigamous marriage, and other similar offenses. Marriage was also a strictly heterosexual institution among Friends. Because of this important role in the meeting, female Friends used their authority in the investigative process to empower themselves. This public role of governing over other women and the more private duty of providing for the education of future women and men helped create the aura of "Nantucket women."

## CHAPTER 4

### THE RISE OF FAMILY LEADERSHIP ON NANTUCKET

Friends from Rhode Island made frequent overtures toward Nantucket to establish Quakerism on the island around the turn of the eighteenth century. Quakers had first settled in Rhode Island in the 1650s to enjoy the relative tolerance they could not receive elsewhere in the English world, establishing Newport as the epicenter of New England Quakerism. Newport Friends made several attempts to strengthen ties between their community and English settlers on the island of Nantucket. The most significant effort to bring Quakerism to Nantucket, though, began in 1698. Over the next decade, traveling ministers from Newport would have their greatest success at converting Nantucket's settlers. In either 1701 or 1702 (the year of his arrival was disputed), John Richardson arrived and found the Starbuck family, particularly Mary Coffin Starbuck, eager to hear about this relatively new denomination. Richardson was said to have first referred to Mary Coffin Starbuck as "Great" or "Great Mary."<sup>101</sup> By Thomas Story's traveling ministry in 1704, Mary Coffin Starbuck had been converted and was a devout Quaker.<sup>102</sup>

Her conversion was the spark needed for the Quaker community to flourish. With the mother of the first English subject to be born on the island providing leadership to this new community, Friends on Nantucket could establish the base of support necessary to petition the New England Yearly Meeting for a monthly meeting. Newport's Quakers had succeeded in creating a sister Quaker community on the island, one similar in its geography and ability to sustain a maritime economy. Mary Coffin Starbuck would prove

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<sup>101</sup> Norling, 56.

<sup>102</sup> Robert J. Leach and Peter Gow, *Quaker Nantucket: The Religious Community Behind the Whaling Empire* (Nantucket Island, Mass.: Mill Hill Press, 1997), 22-24.

to be the matriarch of the women's Quaker meeting on Nantucket. When the meeting was established in 1708, hers was the first of the four female signatories listed, above Ann Trott, Dorcas Starbuck, and Priscilla Coleman.<sup>103</sup> The first official gatherings of the monthly meeting were held in her home prior to the construction of a meetinghouse. Her lasting legacy to the meeting was that her offspring and the island's female Friends would provide the meeting with its first established leadership.

Friends from Newport had exerted a tremendous amount of effort in creating a Quaker presence on Nantucket. In the decade leading up to the granting of a monthly meeting by the New England Yearly Meeting, Newport Quakers made 127 visits by forty-seven traveling ministers between 1698 and 1708.<sup>104</sup> The importance of the island to Newport Quakers was undeniable by the extent to which there were attempts to convert. It was only after John Richardson specifically targeted Mary Coffin Starbuck for conversion that Quakerism caught hold on Nantucket, even after Newport's many less successful attempts in the previous years to bring the faith to the island. The Friends, who were already on the island, including Stephen Hussey, did not carry the moral clout that could lead to the island becoming a Quaker haven. Mary Coffin Starbuck did. Her conversion coincided with the dawn of the eighteenth century and set the religious direction for what would become the most powerful whaling empire in the world over the course of the 1700s.

Mutually, the strength of the women's meeting on Nantucket afforded men on the island to pursue the spoils of whaling, while that wealth combined with male absence

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<sup>103</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends' Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2.

<sup>104</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 22-23.

provided women the opportunity to assume much of the power often reserved for men. The authority of the women's meeting that arose from its early leaders would last throughout the eighteenth century. Two of Starbuck's original co-signers of the petition to the New England Yearly Meeting, Priscilla Coleman and Dorcas Starbuck, took active roles in investigating marriages and treating with Quaker women who were accused of committing transgressions. From the first marriage overseen by the Nantucket meeting in 1709, these two early leaders investigated brides for clearness. By 1712, Judith Barnard joined these two founders in that role. During the next decade, Experience Coffin and Sarah Barnard would also take on this vital role for the women's meeting. The meeting's expansion meant more Quaker women were available to take on these positions of authority. Some women served in this role for up to thirty to forty marriages. Hannah Bunker, Abigail Pinkham, Judith Macy, and Leah Paddack, as well as several others, appear in the meeting minutes as investigating numerous brides before their marriages. For the women's meeting to officially appoint overseers, as well as for some women to hold this position for years and investigate dozens of marriages, places this duty among the most important for women on the island.<sup>105</sup>

By serving in this capacity, Friends gave women tangible public authority over other women. This was particularly true for married women. Rather than an ordained minister, or a husband, or a father holding power over a woman, in Quaker meetings, it was other women. Quakerism was not patriarchal in the way Puritanism was, with all authority resting in the hands of male leaders. Nor was it a homogenous female community, as a convent was for nuns in the Roman Catholic tradition. The Quaker

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<sup>105</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10.



meeting had both male and female leadership, and women benefited from — and at times suffered under — the authority of other women. Nowhere is this more clearly reflected than in marital regulation, where women had the ultimate authority over the future of other women.

The early women's meeting grew under the watchful eye of Mary Coffin Starbuck until her death in 1717. She ensured the power of the Quaker faith by opposing the establishment of an ordained minister on the island. In his travels to Nantucket, Thomas Story details her strong resistance to any minister from another denomination.<sup>106</sup> Her resistance to the preaching of ministers from other denominations came in the form of strong arguments, which is another example of how she set the path for vocal public leadership among Nantucket women. This opposition was also consistent with the views the Society of Friends held against formal, ordained ministers. Quaker traveling ministers were respected, however, as they spread the word about the Inner Light throughout the world. This distinction permitted the Quaker community on Nantucket to grow without a great threat from other houses of worship, but also allowed for a continuation of Nantucket Quakers to travel elsewhere. Perhaps most importantly, it allowed Friends from other Quaker communities to come to Nantucket and proselytize. Mary Coffin Starbuck established herself as a spiritual leader — if not *the* spiritual leader — of Nantucket in the early eighteenth century by creating this Quaker precedent. She also empowered herself by setting the theological direction of the island. At a time of uncertainty among Friends, with George Fox's death barely a decade prior, and Margaret Fell's passing even more recent, Mary Coffin Starbuck maintained their theological integrity and opposition to formal ministry.

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<sup>106</sup> Byers, 53.

The establishment of Quakerism on Nantucket was a fortuitous decision for the future of the island. Adopting a faith that did not frown upon strong public female exertions of authority gave the island the necessary structure for lengthy male absences. Quakerism allowed the women who remained on the island to discipline each other in an affirmative way. Other religions were too patriarchal to allow this. Puritan women could not even speak in church let alone run discipline. Quakerism was the only religion that would allow for this. The alternative was either the centralized authoritative patriarchy of some male minister or anarchy, with only informal influence coming from women. Although whaling would not become a primary economic means for Nantucket until after the establishment of the meeting, and the lengthy male absences would only come in the succeeding decades, it was a near inevitability that Nantucket's economy would revolve around the sea. The Society of Friends gave the island the religious and social structure to become a maritime haven.

Starbuck was only the first of many powerful females on the island. On Nantucket, women could assume power either through their ascendance in the women's meeting or through their economic clout, and in some cases, through both means. Neither financial prowess nor demonstrations of piety necessarily provided a guarantee of empowerment in the Nantucket Quaker community, but both were criteria for ascending the ladder of power. Women could demonstrate piety within the meeting by taking an active role in its business, or by traveling as ministers, or by serving as visitors, or by adhering to a strict standard of regulations from the meeting. Many Quaker women on Nantucket in the eighteenth century held influential positions of public authority. This included holding leadership positions within the women's meeting, serving as outspoken

public advocates against civil and religious authority, and overseeing the family finances in the absence of whaler husbands.<sup>107</sup>

The women's meeting offered some female Friends an avenue for public leadership and education over other women, only if they agreed to adhere to the moral standards set by the monthly meetings and above, in the higher levels of the hierarchy of the New England Yearly Meeting. Such adherence in turn gave female elders and visitors the chance to shape the public enforcement of those regulations over the membership of the women's meeting. Quakerism allowed for devout women to serve as traveling ministers, as well. The women's meeting's authority also opened the door for public acts of individual agency and defiance, as some women became vocal in their disregard for the authority of the women's meeting and their dissent was inevitably known about, essential public dissents. Others rejected the societal expectation that women would yield their political and economic voices to their husbands, choosing instead to speak on their own behalf. The whaling economy on Nantucket similarly gave women more public stewardship over the family's finances, as lengthy absences by whaler husbands meant their wives would run the household's accounts, both in private and in public. In each of these examples, the mothers, sisters, and aunts on Nantucket became vocal leaders in their community, establishing the precedent that would carry that leadership from mothers to daughters and from the island to the mainland in the nineteenth century, including by 1848 to Seneca Falls.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> In this context, "public" was not limited to authority outside of the meeting. Though generally only Friends attended business meetings, the prominence of the Quaker women's meeting on the island during the eighteenth century placed the meeting squarely in public view. What had been private became very much public on Nantucket, especially in the women's meeting.

<sup>108</sup> For a differing view of the role of Quakerism and the women's meeting on future reformers, see Lisa Norling's *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*.

The powerful role Mary Coffin Starbuck and the leaders of the women's meeting had within the Nantucket Quaker community set this community apart from the rest of Massachusetts. Nantucket had only been a part of Massachusetts Bay colony since 1692. As such, Puritanism had not had the opportunity to establish dominion on the island. This allowed for the spread of Quakerism in the first decade of the eighteenth century. By 1711, the monthly meeting had sufficient membership to support the construction of a meetinghouse. At the women's meeting on July 30, 1711, "it was agreed that seven pounds money of the Collection should go to help build our new meeting house which was done accordingly."<sup>109</sup> The role the women's meeting took in the financial future of Quakerism on Nantucket as early as 1711 demonstrated just how committed female Friends were to the long-term success of the Society on the island. This was a community of women actively asserting a stake in, and a level of ownership of, Nantucket Quakerism. This community of Quaker women extended beyond the efforts of one Friend. Yet, after the meeting no longer met at her house, Starbuck still held tremendous influence over the meeting until her death in 1717, and beyond — even if her official duties while alive were limited to correspondence to the quarterly meeting in Newport.

The entirety of the women's meeting — not just the efforts of one woman — had the greatest impact on future generations of female reformers from Nantucket. The evidence for this is in the increased discipline that began more than forty years after Mary Coffin Starbuck's passing. She may have been a founder for Nantucket Quakerism, but the identity on the island for Quaker morality and discipline came from the women who would succeed her in establishing a stronger discipline than existed in the meeting's

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<sup>109</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 2.

nascent years. The framework that emerged out of necessity — forged from male absences and violent vocations at odds with Quaker pacifism — forced women to provide the moral compass for future generations of Friends. Male Friends who served on whaling vessels also endured the trauma associated with that violent vocation. These experiences would have been incompatible with the outward expressions of inner Truth, particularly when such trauma forced or led to dissociation or submerged feelings that could not be expressed publicly by believers in a faith that valued spontaneous feelings of tenderness. This placed women even more at the center of Nantucket's Quaker community. The system of both public and private morality built around the women's meeting and the home became far more influential than any single individual who was a part of the system.

The first female members of the newly chartered Nantucket Monthly Meeting held a gathering in 1708 at the home of Nathaniel Starbuck, Jr., the son of Mary Coffin Starbuck and the first clerk of the meeting. The only outcome of this meeting, other than the note in the minutes that “wee had a good meeting feeling the power of the lord to be Amongst us,” was the establishment of a monthly women's meeting to be held on the “last second day,” or Monday, “of every month.”<sup>110</sup> This declaration on its own was not remarkable. George Fox had sought female autonomy within Quaker meetings, and female Quaker leaders of the previous century such as Margaret Fell established the more prominent and public role of women in the Society of Friends. The New England Yearly Meeting, however, initially rejected the request of four women on the island to establish a women's monthly meeting, despite approving the request of four men to establish their men's meeting. Still, the women felt compelled by the Inner Light to establish a women's

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 1.

meeting, despite this rebuke.<sup>111</sup> This was an important step, as it was indicative of female Nantucket defiance to male patriarchy, particularly from the mainland. The creation of the women's meeting was itself a step toward public self-reliance among Nantucket's female Friends. The business that would transpire at the subsequent women's meetings over the course of the next century would prove at times to be quite remarkable.

The first year's meetings did not address much business, outside of monthly collections of money to provide alms for ailing and widowed Friends, or to pay for a new meetinghouse and its upkeep. In that first year, the women's meeting collected just above five pounds, fifteen shillings. The largest single month's collection was twelve shillings, eleven pence, and no meeting collected less than seven shillings, two pence.<sup>112</sup> That money was used for several purposes, including the building of the first meetinghouse, which was completed in 1711 and expanded in 1716.<sup>113</sup> Joanna Mott and Dorcas Gayer Starbuck were attendants at those early meetings, the latter being appointed clerk of the women's meeting. Her duties as clerk included caring for the financial collections from each meeting.<sup>114</sup> In that first full year, the women's meeting investigated its first prospective marriage when Ebenezer Gardner and Eunice Coffin appeared before the meeting in the ninth month, or November, of 1709. By 1732 and 1733, the expanding Quaker community had outgrown the 1716 expansion, and built a massive meetinghouse, capable of holding hundreds of Friends. Even if the meeting had not become the

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<sup>111</sup> Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 45.

<sup>112</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 1.

<sup>113</sup> Byers, 104.

<sup>114</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 1.

dominant religious entity on the island by the 1730s, still competing with Congregationalist influence, the construction of such a building, “said to be one of the largest buildings in the northern colonies outside the cities of Newport, Boston, and New York,”<sup>115</sup> demonstrates the ability for Quakers to take collections and use them for the betterment of the meeting.

The women’s meeting contributed to joint causes alongside the men’s meeting, but it also showed itself to be financially independent from male Quakers when it came to collections. Pressure from the men’s meeting may have existed in regards to the amount of contribution to some ventures, but Friends, holding to the ideals of unity and peace, would make every attempt to keep such dissent out of meeting minutes. Contributions taken at women’s meetings would go to widows and other women in need, which demonstrates the growth and financial stability of the meeting. Eunice Guinn, who was in need of the financial assistance of the meeting, received the charity of the women’s meeting in her time of need. In 1761, the women’s meeting agreed to give “four Dollars to Eunice Guinn She being in need of Help.”<sup>116</sup> Two months later, the meeting once again collected to help Eunice Guinn, but not before investigating her level of need, ensuring the charity of the meeting was needed again so soon after the earlier contribution. “Mary Barnard & Hephzibah Hussey are appointed to inspect the necessity of Eunice Guinn & Administer what she stands in need of.”<sup>117</sup> Her need was sufficient to cause the women’s meeting to further assist her, requesting “Hephzibah Hussey to Help Eunice Guinn to 2

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<sup>115</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 31.

<sup>116</sup> *Nantucket Women’s Monthly Meeting Minutes, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 74.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

Corde of Wood on the Meetings Acct.”<sup>118</sup> The meeting gave money to other women in dire financial circumstances, or those who performed chores for the meeting, such as Mary Gardner, who was paid out of the women’s meeting coiffeurs several times for sweeping the meetinghouse floor.<sup>119</sup>

The contributions made by the women’s meeting to those Friends in need further indicate the authority of the women’s meeting over its membership. Benefiting financially or through the granting of permission to marry or travel by the women’s meeting came at a cost. One had to remain in the good graces of the meeting and honor its authority to receive permission to marry. Receiving financial support from the meeting would only be granted to those who recognized the authority of the meeting. Those who fell out of favor with the meeting could face strict discipline, as Eunice Guinn was disowned for marrying outside of Friends not long after receiving the charity of the women’s meeting. Her disownment ended the charitable contributions from the women’s meeting she had been receiving.

The increasing size of the women’s meeting made the need for a stronger hierarchy more pressing. This led to greater power being held by women in prominent positions within the meeting. As the women’s meeting created the public mechanism for disciplining women who violated the meeting’s tenets on morality, those who became its leaders wielded tremendous power within the community. The leadership of the meeting also determined the worthiness of potential new women members. Elders led the women’s meeting in its effort to care for female members in need, as well, providing support for those women who had been abandoned. This was one task highlighted by the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.



meeting's reliance on family visitations. Family visitation was a vital part in the enforcement of female authority, and offered the women's meeting knowledge of the domestic situation of its members. Visitors could report back to the meeting on women who were in need, or those who had been abandoned or otherwise would benefit from the meeting's outreach. The women's meeting would take up a collection each month, and part of that money would be available for women who were in dire circumstances, including those who had lost the financial support of their husbands, as with the meeting's charitable treatment of Eunice Guinn in the 1760s.

For the women's meeting to have kept its own records, collected its own money, and decided on the benevolences to its own members placed it in a position of tremendous authority within the community. It was this authority that allowed those who held positions of power to dictate the moral direction of the island's Quaker women. In some ways, the leadership of the women's meeting acted similarly to how whalers' wives acted by necessity, assuming a greater role in conducting business. This position placed tremendous importance on ascending the hierarchy of the women's meeting. Those who became overseers, or visitors, or elders, or even sat head, had a power that came almost solely from the island's women. Margaret Fell and George Fox may have worked to establish the power structure that would govern a monthly meeting's business affairs, but internally, it was entirely up to the women's meeting to dictate who kept the minutes and records, who collected the money, who sat over the business meeting, and who visited with potential brides or disciplined women who had transgressed (though only the men's meeting had the authority to formally disown — an authority the women's meeting

would challenge). This was an institution whose mere existence empowered the island's women.

Marital regulation, though, remained a primary duty of the women's meeting. At the September meeting of 1716, Experience Look Coffin replaced Dorcas Gayer Starbuck in joining Priscilla Starbuck Coleman to investigate the marriage of Keziah Folger to Jethro Gardner.<sup>120</sup> This may be in part because at the very same gathering, the women's meeting appointed Dorcas Gayer Starbuck to serve as the correspondence secretary, which included writing to the quarterly meeting. Some four months later, however, Priscilla Starbuck Coleman and Experience Look Coffin were once again appointed to investigate a marriage, that of Margaret Folger and Jonathan Gardner.<sup>121</sup> At the next meeting, Priscilla Starbuck Coleman accepted the appointment of writing the quarterly report, despite having just investigated Margaret Folger for marriage. The reports themselves were often relatively cursory; though it is likely there was a more thorough discussion on the pertinent subjects than what was recorded. Experience Look Coffin joined the group of leaders of the women's meeting, as she was appointed once again to join Priscilla Coleman in investigating Elizabeth Starbuck prior to approving her marriage to George Hussey. In that first decade, the power structure within the women's meeting evolved with the growing size of the society. The first change came when Anna Trott ceased to sit head at meeting. Sitting head was the closest resemblance to a formal leader the women's meeting had. When Anna Trott stepped down from her position, she was replaced by Judith Coffin Folger-Barnard, who would play a large role in the power

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

structure of the women's meeting for nearly a half century.<sup>122</sup> This new structure of authority would maintain relative harmony within the women's meeting and Quaker community until the 1760s.

Despite theological arguments for equality under God, meetings had an increasingly complex hierarchy. This was true from the advent of women's meetings in Burlington, New Jersey, in 1681, and had made its way to Nantucket in the early eighteenth century.<sup>123</sup> The Friend sitting head was the de facto keeper of time for worship. Since there was no formal officiant over service, and Friends sat in silence, it was an important role to keep time and provide administrative structure to the meeting. This was one of several administrative positions within the women's meeting, some of which applied more to worship, and others more to business. Clerks would keep minutes, and when appointed to do so, write to the quarterly and yearly meetings, primarily a business meeting task. Treasurers maintained the finances of the women's meeting, also mostly tied to business meetings, although at times tied to worship. Considering there were collections taken at every monthly meeting, this was a vital task. Both the women's and men's meetings handled significant amounts of money on a monthly basis. In November of 1761, for example, the men's meeting collected slightly more than ten pounds, four shillings, while the women's meeting collected five pounds, four shillings.<sup>124</sup> Although the men's meeting collected more than the women's meeting some months, the women's meeting still held autonomous financial power with their own

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<sup>122</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. V, 145.

<sup>123</sup> Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period," *American Quarterly*, 30, 5 (Winter, 1978): 723.

<sup>124</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 162. *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 75.

collections. On Nantucket, women had substantial financial clout within the meeting because they would often be the receivers and keepers of their whaler husband's wages.

Overseers, or members of oversight committees, looked after the general well-being of the meeting's members, as well as taking part in investigations of women who wished to marry in meeting. Oversight could be associated with both business and with worship, although it primarily applied to business. As with other committees in the women's meeting at this time, overseers would be paired to perform tasks together. Elders maintained the spirituality of the women's meeting, and were often among the most respected of Friends, primarily a function of worship. Along with elders in playing a leadership role in worship, ministers would stand up in meeting to speak — though this was technically open to all Friends in good standing who felt compelled by the Inner Light. Some ministers traveled, both to other Quaker communities and to the outside world, to promote Quaker spirituality. To maintain credibility with the meetings they visited, ministers would carry certificates from their home meetings verifying their Quaker status, and that their home meeting believed them to be vessels of Truth, women whose voice carried considerable weight within meeting. This ensured that only those who spoke Truth, as recognized by the larger Quaker hierarchical structure, had access to other Friends. Finally, visitors, although sometimes referring to members from other meetings, also applied to those who counseled with those who expressed interest in joining a particular meeting.

The leadership in the women's meeting by 1718 had been established along these lines, although, with only 48 members, the leadership would not consist of as many as it would later in the century. Judith Coffin Folger-Barnard (to later marry Stephen Wilcock)

sat head of the meeting at the age of 43, having replaced Anna Trott. Dorcas Gayer Starbuck was the clerk of the meeting, and she was also 43. Priscilla Starbuck Coleman, previously mentioned for having conducted the investigations for each of the first ten marriages before the meeting, was a minister. These women, though not among the oldest women in the meeting, held positions of authority and were looked up to as its leadership. There were others who played an active role in the business of the meeting, such as Experience Look Coffin and Sarah Macy Barnard. Sarah Shattuck Gardner, at the age of 87, provided guidance to the early women's meeting, along with Mary Coffin Starbuck prior to her death in 1717.<sup>125</sup> Each of these women would retain her position of authority in the meeting for at least a decade. The hierarchy of the women's meeting would evolve in the first few decades, with prominent Quaker women — mostly married women, but with some Friends who had not married — accepting roles sitting head, or as clerks, treasurers, ministers, elders, or on committees of oversight. These positions were open to female members of the meeting in good standing, and the meeting decided who would fill these roles. The women in each of these positions served a different purpose in the meeting, and as membership in the women's meeting grew, the number of women serving in these roles increased. The meeting's forty-eight members in 1718 was an increase from the twenty-seven at the founding of the meeting. By 1728, the membership approached one hundred.

With the women's meeting strong in numbers in 1728, the power structure for the next three decades was being established. Judith Coffin Folger-Barnard-Wilcock, the granddaughter of founding islander Tristram Coffin, twice a widow, continued to sit at head of meeting. She had first married Peter Folger a decade before the founding of the

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<sup>125</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. V, 174.

meeting. Her second marriage, to Nathaniel Barnard, was the second marriage the women's meeting would see. Nathaniel Barnard died in 1718, leaving Judith with four children under the age of ten. She would marry once more, in 1722, to a Friend from Dartmouth, Stephen Wilcock. In the meeting minutes, her status as a widow is specifically mentioned.<sup>126</sup> She remained an active member of the meeting until her death in 1760, and continued to sit at head of meeting, as well as taking part in investigating the clearness of more than a dozen women in the 1720s and 1730s. The position of clerk also remained in the same hands as it was in 1718, with Dorcas Gayer Starbuck serving as clerk and elder until 1733, when she hands the position over to her sister-in-law, Dinah Coffin Starbuck, who would remain in that position for a decade. By 1764, the women's meeting began using the title "elder," as it appears in reference to Mary Gardner and, one month later, Mehetable Pollard.<sup>127</sup>

Damaris Gayer Coffin, sister of Dorcas Gayer Starbuck, was a part of the inner circle of the women's meeting, as well. She had been widowed since 1721, when her husband Nathaniel Coffin died, leaving her with nine children. Two of the children were under ten years of age at the time of their father's death, and four were under eighteen. She would live into her early nineties and remain an active member in meeting, serving as an elder.<sup>128</sup> Joining her as elders were Mary Starbuck Folger, 36, Mary Bunker Coffin, 40, and three of the more powerful women on the island. Anna Trott was 73 in 1728, the mother of Abigail Trott Brown, who married George Brown, a descendent from the

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<sup>126</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 12.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>128</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. VI, 266-272.

Gardner family on his maternal line, in 1720. Anna Trott was one of the first female Friends on the island, a founding member of the women's meeting. Sarah Macy Barnard, 51 in 1728, also served as an elder, combining the political clout of the Macy and Barnard families in the meeting.

But no woman on the island attained the public fame Anna Folger Starbuck did. She was still young in 1728, having been born in 1703. Daughter of Judith Coffin Folger-Barnard-Wilcox, her sister Mary Folger Gardner was the widow of Nathaniel Gardner, who died in 1727, and was the son of Nathaniel Gardner, Sr., who died in 1713 while traveling with Nathaniel Starbuck, Jr., to Philadelphia and England to report to other meetings on the Truth found on the island.<sup>129</sup> Mary would marry another Nathaniel, this time prominent Friend Nathaniel Coleman, in 1729. Meanwhile, Anna Folger married William Starbuck, who would become a minister in the men's meeting, in 1720, and the couple had six children.<sup>130</sup> Aside from having many prominent Quaker ancestors and recognition as contemporary vessels of the truth, the couple had enormous wealth, and was not shy about displaying that fortune, perhaps as an expression of public power within the community. She was known mostly by non-Quakers as the "Queen of the Quakers," which was meant more as an insult than a compliment.<sup>131</sup> That other denominations did not have such strict guidelines of simplicity could have indicated that her ostentatious nature may have given the impression that she and William were among the most successful Quakers on the island — which they were.<sup>132</sup> Flaunting her wealth

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<sup>129</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 37.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>131</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. V, 186.

<sup>132</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. VI, 266-272.

may have also led some non-Quakers to believe that her family not only had tremendous wealth but that in comparison to other Quaker families who did not make public displays of their wealth, her family far surpassed other Quaker families that had attained wealth, but did not display it as publicly. Holy conversation within Quaker families came with the expectation that all Quaker words and gestures would be pure expressions of love and tenderness, and not the greed that accompanied a life of luxury. This conflict between wealth on the island and Quaker simplicity would continue to play out over the eighteenth century in the women's meeting, particularly as the lucrative whaling industry became the focal point of Nantucket's wealth.

Women within the meeting could also ascend to positions of power by becoming traveling ministers, a position not open to women in other Protestant sects. Still, there were financial and familial limitations on which women had the ability to travel to different Quaker meetings in the Atlantic world. Priscilla Starbuck Coleman served as a minister during the meeting's early years. She was 52 in 1728, still serving her position as minister from 1718. Her duties investigating women's clearness prior to marriage had come to an end as she assumed a more active role in worship. Joining Priscilla Starbuck Coleman as a minister was the recently-married Hephzibah Starbuck Hussey. She had married Silvanus Hussey in 1723 just prior to her twenty-third birthday.<sup>133</sup> Silvanus Hussey was the eldest son of the disowned — and outspoken — Stephen Hussey, and married Hephzibah shortly after rejoining the meeting. Silvanus Hussey owned slaves, despite the Nantucket Monthly Meeting taking an early stand against slavery, issuing an

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<sup>133</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 13-14.



epistle in 1716 against slavery.<sup>134</sup> Hephzibah Starbuck Hussey sued an indigenous girl, accusing her of stealing, and was awarded her labor under a year's indenture as punishment. Joining them on the roster of ministers was Mehetable Gardner Pollard, one year Hephzibah Starbuck Hussey's senior. Mehetable Gardner Pollard had married Phillip Pollard in 1724. Theirs was the first marriage investigated by Judith Coffin Folger-Barnard-Wilcox since her 1722 wedding to Stephen Wilcox.<sup>135</sup> Each of these women came from prosperous and established islander families. Their clout within meeting was matched by their reputation within the community — although, as Hephzibah Starbuck Hussey shows, financial prosperity did not always equate to respect and esteem within the community.<sup>136</sup>

Judith Coffin Folger-Barnard-Wilcox, while sitting head at the women's meeting, was joined by one of the overseers, Judith Worth Macy, in investigating Mehetable Gardner Pollard for clearness before she was permitted to marry Phillip Pollard. Macy was 39 in 1728, and had been serving on such committees since 1723. After a lengthy hiatus from investigating committees, she reappears to help Mehetable Pollard investigate Deborah Hussey's clearness before her 1738 marriage to Peter Coffin.<sup>137</sup> Also on the list of overseers was 35-year-old Abial Gardner Clasby. She married William Clasby, of

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<sup>134</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 16.

<sup>135</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 15.

<sup>136</sup> Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, 234. Wealth could even provide the means for Friends to insulate children from the sinfulness of the outside world. Providing the financial means for children's futures could prevent exogamy or the lure of the non-Quaker world. The fear of losing children to the "world" was quite real for many Quakers. Among the Chester and Welsh Tract Quakers of the Delaware Valley, the second generation of Friends "did lose more children to the 'world' than their parents had." Wealth that was amassed quietly allowed Friends to have families that shared tender and orderly love, and offered greater opportunity of ensuring holy conversation.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

Ringwood, England, in 1719. The couple had eight children. Abial Gardner Clasby served on seven committees, five of them between 1729 and 1735, and the other two in 1755 and 1756, the last coming shortly before her death.<sup>138</sup> Joining these women as overseers was Abigail Hall Hussey, 48 years old in 1728. Abigail was born in Rockingham, New Hampshire, in 1680, and moved to the home of her husband, Batchelder Hussey, on Nantucket. She became quite active in meeting on Nantucket, serving on 15 committees between 1722 and 1731.<sup>139</sup>

The list of active women Friends in 1718, and the increase in that list over the next decade, shows an active meeting just twenty years into its existence. An abundance of women filled the various administrative roles the meeting required. This would have been more easily accomplished within the women's meeting than in the men's, in part due to the higher number of participants on the rolls in the women's meeting. Lisa Norling cites Catharine Phillips, who in 1754 observed the stronger state of female membership in the Nantucket meeting, and George Churchman's 1781 estimate that the island was, by that time, skewed toward women at a three-to-one ratio.<sup>140</sup> The spiritual egalitarianism found within Quakerism attracted many women to its fold. Margaret Fell's leadership in the first years of the Society of Friends may have helped attract women to Quakerism, as well. There also was a natural magnetism toward a religious community largely spearheaded at its founding by a woman, Mary Coffin Starbuck. On a more practical level, more women stayed on the island, and could become increasingly

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>139</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10.

<sup>140</sup> Norling, 88-89.

involved in meeting. Whalers — at least those not lost at sea — would often be out at sea, not having the opportunity to become more actively involved in meeting. In sum, the women's meeting on Nantucket gave early American women an unrivaled opportunity to wield public power and responsibility and they took to it with verve, essentially making the public women of the island or the leaders of the women's meeting the known moral leaders of life on the island.

The women's meeting on Nantucket was quite active in its first half-century despite the lack of activity in disciplining Friends prior to 1760. Robert Leach argues that the meeting's reluctance to disown was "a sign of the reluctance of Friends to cast loose one of their own."<sup>141</sup> He argues, "(i)rregularities in behavior in the past had been addressed in a communal, even familial, spirit: confrontation, apology, forgiveness."<sup>142</sup> The women's meeting handled some discipline, after all, but as Margaret Hope Bacon notes, the men's meeting was responsible for publishing papers of disownment. By the beginning of the 1760s, however, the harmonious nature of the women's meeting would change drastically. That shift was from frequent, almost endless, attempts to visit and treat with transgressed Friends to more efforts being made to disown violators, and less energy spent in healing. This change meant not only that the leaders of the women meetings became established as public women but that also the many women they sought to discipline, and failing that eject from moral society, were forced into a new role — public women themselves who either decided to accept the female authority of the meeting or who publicly rebelled by asserting by action and sometimes word their own sense of public morality. In a sense, thanks to the activities of the women's meeting, all

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<sup>141</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 105.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

women on Nantucket became public women whose moral choices about family and community life and their own lives were not hidden from history or their neighbors – they became public events.

Some of the change that took place in the women's meeting in the 1760s and 1770s can be attributed to the reform movement spreading through American Quakerism in the middle and late eighteenth century. As the first generations of female Quakers died or stepped down from positions of power within the meeting, new leadership took over. With this new leadership came an increase in discipline and more openness to discussing transgressions in a frank and direct way. Slightly more than the first half-century of women's meeting minutes, up to 1761, was contained in 75 pages, while the minutes from years 1762 to 1778 covered just over than 200 pages. Dirty laundry was now more eagerly aired in public.

Technological advancements in whaling over the course of the eighteenth century placed even more power in the hands of the women's meeting. Technology in storing oil harvested from whales allowed for considerably longer voyages, where whales, once harpooned, would bleed until it died of its own fluids. Tryworks, which were by the middle of the century found on most whaling ships, would harvest the blubber from the whale, which would then be boiled down to oil stored in barrels in the hull. This was a gruesome yet lucrative business, and for many men, especially the owners of the ship and cargo, it was worth the gore, the boredom, and the risks. Men were away for months, and in many cases, years at a time. The longer voyages also allowed for more visits to other ports, opening the door of opportunity for Nantucket Quaker men to seek out female companionship outside of their island marriage. Meanwhile, the growing dependence on

whaling led to more men being lost at sea than in the industries found on the island.

Whaling was not the only dangerous maritime profession, but the small six-man boats that set off from larger ships to harpoon whales placed men in a precarious situation, especially when hundreds of miles from shore.

These realities forced the hand of some women to seek potential spouses outside of the Nantucket Quaker meeting. In 1765, Ruth Bunker Myrick (recorded in the meeting minutes as Meyrick) publicly acknowledged and apologized for marrying her first husband, John Myrick, outside of Friends. John Myrick was lost at sea in 1761, at the age of twenty-one.<sup>143</sup> Her acknowledgment was accepted, she was welcomed back into the meeting, and the next month she declared her intentions of marrying Shubael Barnard.<sup>144</sup> This would only be the tip of the iceberg regarding the meeting's women marrying outside of Friends. In many cases, the errant women's apologies came only after that marriage ended, whether by a husband's death at sea or on land or irreconcilable differences that lead to dissolution of a marriage — though it is worth noting that Quaker marriages could not be dissolved outside of the death of a spouse. Disownment was, for some women, a temporary status, since marriages outside of Friends were not recognized within meeting, although women who had married outside of Friends were referred to by their married names in the meeting minutes, as was the case with Eunice Guinn.<sup>145</sup> A woman had the possibility of returning to meeting after being disowned for marrying

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<sup>143</sup> The Eliza Starbuck Barney Genealogical Record, available online from the Nantucket Historical Association, [www.nha.org](http://www.nha.org)

<sup>144</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 84-85.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

outside of Friends. This transgression, however, prevented that woman from ascending to any significant position of power within the women's meeting.

The change in leadership within the women's meeting around 1760 and the increase in disownments, as well as public discipline, of women for marital offenses appeared to have had a detrimental impact on the power of the leaders within the women's meeting over some of the meeting's membership. The leaders of the women's meeting in the first half-century of its existence had considerable esteem and clout within the community, gaining deference from the meeting's women who rarely challenged in meeting their authority and judgment. As the meeting as a whole began to struggle, though, and with growing resentment toward this more overt display of power, some women pushed back against this discipline. In 1774, Mary Pinkham Clary was one of several women who either refused to "make satisfaction" with the women sent to investigate wrongdoing, or chose disownment over public discipline.<sup>146</sup> Anna Folger Gardner in 1775 did the same, choosing disownment over heeding the discipline. Quakerism no longer had unchallenged authority over the female population of the island. The meeting had lost its grip on the island because more women voluntarily chose to disassociate from it, rather than face the discipline of the women's meeting. Though this may have led some women away from the meeting, it may have increased the esteem of the women's meeting's leaders insofar as they were seen as the guardians of morality in an era of decadence.

The previously mentioned dispute between Anna Folger Gardner and the meeting demonstrated changes within Nantucket Quakerism. For one, the meeting, once the domain of a few powerful families, was no longer the small clique it had once been. Anna

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 138.

Folger Gardner's family ties could not save her from the rebuke of the elders. As was the case with Jabez Macy, an elder who was disowned and later reinstated after a feud over sheep grazing on the public common, the meeting had become proactive in disciplining even the most entrenched of Nantucket Quakers for various offenses. Jabez Macy was in his seventies at the time of his disownment. Elders in general, both in the women's and men's meetings, came from the ranks of those who had been a part of the meeting and had established themselves as public moral leaders within its hierarchy. This gave elders the public authority to discipline even the most entrenched Friends for their transgressions.

Nantucket women did not only express themselves religiously but some were outspoken politically, as well. The most famous example of this is the case of Keziah Coffin, born Folger and cousin to Benjamin Franklin, with whom she occasionally corresponded. She was the subject of the fictionalized title character in *Miriam Coffin, or the Whale Fishermen*, a best-selling novel in the nineteenth century that borrowed heavily from her experiences. Its author, Joseph C. Hart, had visited Nantucket in the 1830s, more than three decades after her death.<sup>147</sup> The legend of Keziah Coffin, both positive and negative, lingered, and provided the inspiration for Hart's work. In his work, intended as much to encourage governmental support for the whaling industry as to recount Nantucket's eighteenth-century whaling lore, Coffin is depicted as a "pariah" whose heavy-handed involvement in her family's financial matters led to the ruin of her husband.<sup>148</sup> This depiction overstates the impact of her leadership as a cause of the

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<sup>147</sup> Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and Its People, 1602-1890* (Nantucket, Mass.: Mill Hill Press, 1994), 123.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

demise of the family's fortune. She was more outspoken than the traditional "deputy husband" role of other Nantucket wives, based on accounts of her reactions to authority. But it was more her loyal support for the British during the revolution, after she had already been disowned by the meeting, that was most ruinous to the family finances, a fate suffered by many Nantucket Quakers who continued to trade with the British.

The women's meeting reported that Friends had:

Treated with Keziah Coffin for keeping a Spinnet In Her house & Teaching her Daughter Or Causing her to Bee Taught To Play Thereon Contrary to the advice of Friends But She Not Being Willing to Submit to the Judgment of Friends Requests a Release From Being Esteem'd A Member of This Society any Longer. It's The Mind of This Meeting That Her Request Be Granted & That She Bee Deni'd & No Longer Esteem'd A Member of Our Society Until Friends Recieves Further Satisfaction from Her.<sup>149</sup>

Quaker prohibition against music included the ownership of musical instruments, but could also extend to attending a wedding or other festivity where there was music and dancing. As much as Friends faced disownment for owning musical instruments or attending weddings and other events where music was played, the wording of this disownment indicates she rejected the judgment of the meeting and instead sought her own denial, which the meeting granted to her. The meeting had already warned her about her dress, as well as that of her daughter, also named Keziah. John Coffin, her husband, was fifteen years older than she was, and she was not fitting the expected role of a dutiful wife, though this was not a cause of her disownment. Her ownership of a spinet so her daughter could play was the last of several acts of disobedience toward the wishes of the meeting, and ultimately led to her disownment. At a time when coverture presumed the

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<sup>149</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 124.



ownership of property to a husband, for Keziah to face disownment for the spinet indicates the meeting attributed ownership of the instrument to her, and therefore believed she was solely responsible for its presence in the house. What is most worth noting in the events of Keziah Coffin's rebuke from the meeting, her family remained in good standing with the meeting even after her own disownment. While it was common for some family members to remain in good standing with the meeting while others were disowned, in this instance, the presence of a musical instrument within the house the entire family shared was the stated reason for her disownment, yet the rest of her family was not sanctioned for its presence.

Despite being married to a disowned Quaker, John Coffin remained in good standing with Friends, as did Keziah the younger. This is worth noting, as normal coverture laws would suggest the husband is responsible for all property within the home. Yet in this case, the wife is disowned for desecrating the piety of the home with a musical instrument, and the meeting assumed the assertive Keziah was responsible for its presence, not her paper patriarch husband.

The meeting placed no requirement on those whose spouses had been disowned for disciplinary offenses to similarly be punished. Although marital offenses, such as fornication or marrying too close in relations could lead to disownment of one or both partners unless there was an acknowledgment, offenses that had nothing to do with marriage, including Keziah Coffin's brazen reaction to the meeting over the possession of a spinet, did not threaten the family structure. Despite the various transgressions of the family, her husband, John Coffin, and her daughter Keziah remained members of the meeting. The spinet was relocated to the Hussey household, but the younger Keziah

continued to play it in covert defiance of the meeting. Keziah Coffin, Jr., was not disowned until she married Phineas Fanning out of the meeting.<sup>150</sup>

Keziah's disownment may have afforded her greater leniency in speaking out on political matters, which she did when the colonies were in open revolt against the crown. Some Nantucketers were open about their personal political beliefs, though the Quaker meeting took steps against strong expressions of political allegiances. The minutes of the second half of the 1770s demonstrate the meeting's willingness to disown men who actively fought on ships during the war, or even those who served on an armed ship. There were other Nantucketers who more openly took sides. The political divisions on the island went beyond Kezia Coffin. She is a clear example, though, of a woman brought up in the Nantucket Quaker tradition who expressed her personal political leanings publicly. Coffin even wore black long after the conclusion of the war in mourning.<sup>151</sup> After an accusation of treason against her during the war, her life spiraled downward. Officials seized her property, as was commonly done to British sympathizers, and she relocated to Nova Scotia. She almost drowned in 1782, faced the death of her husband in 1788, and fell down a set of stairs to her death in March of 1798 while pursuing legal action against those who had seized her property at the conclusion of the revolution. She did not live long enough to witness the death of her son-in-law, Phineas Fanning, who died in December of 1798 while the younger Keziah was five months pregnant.<sup>152</sup> Yet Keziah Coffin perpetuated the example begun by Mary Coffin Starbuck of strong,

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<sup>150</sup> Philbrick, 125.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>152</sup> Eliza Starbuck Barney Genealogical Record, available online from the Nantucket Historical Association, [www.nha.org](http://www.nha.org)

publicly outspoken Nantucket women. Unlike Starbuck, though, Keziah Coffin felt no need to frame her outspokenness in her husband's voice or seek followers in the community. Starbuck, when speaking publicly, would often state that her views were those held jointly by herself and her husband, suggesting that she would not express ideas that were solely hers in public. Keziah Coffin felt no compulsion to do the same later in the century when expressing her views in public, nor did the meeting attribute her views to her husband, holding her solely responsible for the opinions she expressed. These examples illustrate the independent woman of Nantucket who was willing to state strong opinions on religious and political matters, even if those opinions did not coincide with others.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE WOMEN'S MEETING'S TAKE ON FORNICATION AND INCEST

When the Nantucket women's monthly meeting met in March of 1793, among the business conducted was the case of a young woman, Lydia Hussey, who was accused of being "guilty of the sin of Fornication."<sup>153</sup> The women's meeting minutes are replete with notices of married couples accused of engaging in sex before marriage. As was standard Quaker practice, the women's meeting dispatched two observers to investigate the matter, in this instance Dorcas Brown and Sarah Barker. The investigation found that the couple had engaged in sexual contact before marriage, which was nothing unusual in eighteenth-century Nantucket, though premarital sexual contact was an offense for which the Quaker meeting frequently disciplined its members. The couple had not declared their intentions of marriage to the meeting, but when Laban Barnard, the father of the child, was out at sea and Hussey gave birth, it was evident their relationship had been sexual.<sup>154</sup> The child did not survive. The couple had no children who did. After the observers met with Lydia Hussey Barnard, and as the men's meeting dispatched three observers to meet with Laban Barnard, she offered to make an acknowledgment of her transgression to the women's meeting. Once the meeting came to this decision, it dispatched Judith Hussey to inform her that the meeting had agreed to accept her acknowledgment.<sup>155</sup> The committee that

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<sup>153</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1787-1815*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 11, 69.

<sup>154</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1789-1824*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 4, 60.

<sup>155</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1787-1815*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 11, 78.

met with Laban Barnard did not find him as agreeable to the meeting's discipline, however, and he was disowned.<sup>156</sup>

The scholarship of Phyllis Mack, Jean Soderlund, and Margaret Hope Bacon, among other Quaker historians, portrays a community where women had greater rights and greater autonomy than in most communities, especially less gender egalitarian communities such as the Puritans.

However, there is a contradiction regarding marital regulations that must be explored. Because of Puritan influence Massachusetts law departed from English law when it came to marriage. In separating from ecclesiastical influences that had driven marriage law in Catholic and Anglican communities, Puritans made marriage a civil act. This took religion out of significant consideration for marriage, which freed Puritan courts to allow for much greater legal freedoms for married women.<sup>157</sup> What was contradictory about the Quaker community is that on Nantucket, Quaker women would have had access to this more liberal interpretation of marriage law — except that the Quakers mandated marriage by their own rules and not the civil authority of Massachusetts. Nantucket's female Friends provided the moral compass and the army of enforcement for that restricting influence, even when it came at the expense of disciplining fellow Friends and family members for sins other denominations thought not worth mentioning.

Fornication offered the greatest threat to the institution of holy Quaker marriage on Nantucket in the first half of the eighteenth century, and was the most common marital

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<sup>156</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1789-1824*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 4, 62.

<sup>157</sup> Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 61.

transgression addressed by the meeting, along with exogamy (marrying a non-Quaker or marrying a birth right Quaker outside of meeting albeit usually legally). The meeting disciplined five couples and five individuals for premarital sex in the years before the 1760 reforms. In none of these cases was a Friend disowned, though in two instances the transgressions included both fornication and exogamy.<sup>158</sup> In most circumstances, an acknowledgment from both partners satisfied the concerns of the meeting.

Nantucket's women's meeting had addressed cases of fornication throughout the century. In most cases, as was the situation with Lydia Hussey Barnard, the couple did marry after their sexual encounter(s), and in this case, the birth. What is notable about this particular case is that as late as in the 1790s, the Quaker meeting was regulating against pre-marital sex among couples who would become married. This was decades after Congregationalists had largely stopped regulating against pre-marital sex among couples who would soon thereafter marry. For much of the eighteenth century, Massachusetts civil law only punished those women who bore children out of wedlock, and "prosecutions of couples who married following the conception of their first child were discontinued early in the eighteenth century."<sup>159</sup> The Massachusetts courts focused almost solely on unmarried mothers and their offspring. The meeting's decision to disown some married members and make others publicly acknowledge wrongdoing placed Quakerism in the position of being clearly more restrictive in regards to sexual relations and marriage than Congregationalists on the island and on the mainland.

Quakers were always more punitive against those who engaged in premarital sex than

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<sup>158</sup> *Quaker Committee Book of Objections*, Henry Barnard Worth Collection, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 35, Book 9.

<sup>159</sup> Else L. Hambleton, *Daughters of Eve: Pregnant Brides and Unwed Mothers in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 177.

other Protestant denominations were. Twenty years prior, Margaret Gardner Swain was disowned for “(g)oining Out from the Good Order of Friends to Marry & Likewise Being Guilty of having a Child Too Soon after Marriage,” and refusing to publicly acknowledge her wrongdoing in meeting.<sup>160</sup>

Children were welcome as adding to the larger Quaker community, and even expected among younger couples, but to avoid suspicion of fornication, a charge that would lead to at least a public acknowledgment of the misdeed, if not to disownment, the meeting demanded that those children be conceived only in Quaker approved wedlock. Disowned Quakers could still attend weekly worship services, as worship was open to all, but they did not have any power in the meeting, nor could they attend business meetings or receive certificates for traveling, or serve as traveling ministers. In some cases, disownment was not a permanent fate. This regulation could differ from meeting to meeting, though. Nantucket’s meeting proved to be less forgiving than other meetings in New England when it came to some offenses, both before and after the increased discipline of reform.<sup>161</sup> There was a cost to its membership for both the spiritual fulfillment that came from belonging to such a pious religious community and for having a religious institution with such a strong, authoritarian female order. That cost was a community that more closely restricted the behavior of its members and openly excluded those who failed to achieve purity in sexual conduct.

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<sup>160</sup> *Nantucket Women’s Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 127.

<sup>161</sup> Carla Gardina Pestana, *Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 179-180. Pestana addresses this in her examination of discipline in the Salem, Massachusetts, Monthly Meeting. She cites a couple that has their first child seven months after marriage. In the case cited, the couple did not face any discipline from the Salem Monthly Meeting. Pestana argues that, “either the meeting knew this to be a premature birth or simply ignored the infraction that the timing suggested.”

Aside from seeming a killjoy enterprise, the regulation of marriage appears on the surface a mundane and tedious task, steeped in bureaucracy with no meaningful power or emotional and intellectual challenge or ramifications. Some might construe that the granting of limited authority to the women's meeting was means of offering only superficial power to that body, thus establishing the men's meeting as wielding true power on the island while relegating the women's meeting to busy-work administrative tasks with no tangible authority. This was clearly not the case in Quaker meetings, though. Regulating marriage was a vital task in preserving the family structure on Nantucket. It served not only to ensure domestic harmony on the island but also to create the foundation for the preservation and continuation of Nantucket Quakerism through educational and economic connections. The women's meeting ensured women did not violate Quaker restrictions on fornication, exogamy, incest, and bigamy (all complicated issues on an island community, as will be seen). The role of women in marriage regulation also established the women meeting's leaders as public leaders, wielding an authority that extended beyond the wedding to the marriage through family visiting and continued oversight of Nantucket homes by the female leadership. The public administration of marriage by the women's meeting was a complex and powerful preoccupation that placed Quaker women at the center of discussions regarding the enforcement of theological, ethical, economic, and intellectual issues. Public control over Nantucket homes provided a direct path for female Friends toward the empowered intellectual discussions that would be at the heart of the nineteenth century reform movement, including the discourse that took place during the women's rights convention at Seneca Falls.



The American Quaker reform movement documented by Jack Marietta had made its way to Nantucket both early in its existence and at in its later years. Noted reformer John Woolman visited the island in 1747, following in the footsteps of John Griffith.<sup>162</sup> Both men pushed for an increased religiosity in the meeting that was otherwise viewed by other Friends as too lenient and formulaic. This push for early reform combined with the influence of reformers in the New England Yearly Meeting in Newport to steer the meeting toward more stringent discipline on the transgressions of Friends. The struggle between more lenient discipline of Friends and a focus on the religiosity that comes from higher moral standards would be constant over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century. Not only did Nantucket Friends meet with reformers like Woolman and Griffith but it also hosted Elias Hicks in 1793.<sup>163</sup> The Hicks visit and the later schism within American Quakerism over his beliefs reflected conflicted attitudes among island Friends over the acceptance or resistance to reforming Quakerism.<sup>164</sup>

The meeting's turn toward reform was not a punitive act meant to publicly humiliate members for their transgressions, but instead was a push for greater piety within Quaker meetings and families. Holiness inside the family made for strong Quaker leadership in the meeting. Those who steadfastly followed the mandates of Friends lived a more pious Quaker life, and would bring up children who similarly lived in Quaker piety. In a religion purposefully lacking rituals, marriage and the family were at the core

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<sup>162</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 74-75.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>164</sup> Elias Hicks' schism with Orthodox Quakerism was a reaction to the increasingly mainstream nature of yearly meetings. Hicks believed Friends lost their direct connection with the Inner Light when they relied too heavily on scripture, as other Protestant sects did, over experiential worship. He also sought to decentralize the authority of yearly meetings, placing greater control in the hands of monthly meetings, which had a stronger connection with the local community.

of this religiosity, and why Friends so strongly emphasized the idealized institution of holy marriage. Reformers in the movement called for stronger discipline over marriage and the family for this very reason.

As seen, the model of the spiritual marriage and its importance on Quaker Nantucket established the ideal of the family within the meeting. When that vital relationship was disrupted, the meeting reacted quite harshly toward those it saw as fomenting the disharmony, which ultimately threatened the spiritual ideal of a holy family unit. After carefully treating with the offending party, the meeting may choose setting aside or disowning a member. This was often reserved for the harshest cases and for those who offered the meeting no satisfaction — in other words, those who would not acknowledge their wrongdoings and the meeting's authority over them. The visitors appointed by the meeting would occasionally come to an agreement with the alleged offender out of open meeting and report back to the meeting that they had received satisfaction in their treating with the party. It was often the case that the alleged offender had to publicly acknowledge wrongdoing, however, or face the sanction of the meeting. This public acknowledgment was an important element for Quakers, as it dictated how Friends would be seen in the world. If Friends professed that they could not take public oaths because all Quaker speaking should be Truth, it was essential that meetings take steps to ensure that its membership was continuously meeting the standards of speaking Truth. Friends' commitment to maintaining holy conversation was critical to maintaining that standing. This was as true in marriage as it was in Friends' maintenance of "thee" and "thou" as socially leveling pronouns.<sup>165</sup> The intent was not only to draw closeness to the language found in the Bible but also to sever all distinctions and level all as equal

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<sup>165</sup> Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, 192.

under God. Despite the efforts of the meeting to ensure a holy marriage that would provide for the future financial security and educational foundation for the community, there were many instances of marital transgressions, as the 1773 and 1793 fornication cases of Margaret Gardner Swain and Lydia Hussey Barnard suggest.

After the reforms from the mainland recounted by Jack Marietta reached Nantucket by around 1760, the meeting continued to view fornication as a great sin, while it took a harsher line against exogamy. The number of Friends charged with exogamy without also facing discipline for fornication rose dramatically. Marietta's research on the Delaware Valley parallels the shift that took place in New England, albeit a few years after the first reform movements within Quakerism took hold near Philadelphia.<sup>166</sup>

This evidence suggests that Nantucket Quakers had maintained a focus on fornication from the founding of the meeting, but regulation of exogamy became a greater issue after the reform movement and the leadership of the New England Yearly Meeting guided individual meetings toward prosecution of perpetrators of that transgression. Nantucket differs from other Quaker communities, including the Delaware Valley, in its increased focus on fornication over exogamy in the first half of the eighteenth century. Reform on Nantucket not only increased the meeting's public exertion of discipline over its members, but it fundamentally shifted which transgressions were considered the greatest threats to the meeting. The authority of the meeting, including the women's meeting, used harsh language in its discipline of Friends accused of fornication, whether they married their fellow transgressor or not. Yet public

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<sup>166</sup> Marietta, 55.

condemnations for Friends whose sole offense was marrying out of meeting were not commonly found in the meeting minutes or the Book of Objections until the 1760s.

The meeting's focus on fornication provided protection for some women. Though many women willingly engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage, some may have been reluctant, and the meeting's prohibition on fornication could have provided those women the religious justification for rejecting their beau's advances. In this context, the meeting may have empowered its female members regarding their own sexuality. Women had the religious justification to reject unwanted advances, and in doing so maintained autonomy over their bodies. Whereas Puritans accepted sex by engaged couples as a way of sealing the marital contract, female Friends could use Quaker discipline as a means of delaying that first sex act. When a beau did not comply with a woman's rejection, she could bring her attacker before the meeting and have him disciplined. (Jedidah Folger would accuse Robert Gardner of this offense. Her case is detailed in Chapter 6.) Women having such authority over their own sexuality and that of their suitors may have further influenced young women on the island, paving the way for nineteenth century attitudes about female morality.

Unlike the earlier period, when the meeting charged Anna Folger Gardner (not to be confused with Anna Gardner, the nineteenth century abolitionist and women's rights leader) with fornication in 1775, the meeting's acceptance of her acquiescence in publicly reading a statement of condemnation to the meeting and having it recorded in the minutes was not a certainty. When the meeting attempted to force Anna Gardner's hand by making her read such a testimony in 1775, she was not as compliant as most women reproached by the meeting in the previous half-century. Rather than submitting to the

pressure put on her from the community, she spoke out against what she felt was the unjust judgment of her by the meeting. So, when the meeting declared her “guilty of unlawful intercourse with him that is now her husband,” it was expected that she would confess her sins before the entire meeting, as others had before her.<sup>167</sup> Instead, “she refused to condemn it saying she chose to be disowned.”<sup>168</sup> The Nantucket Monthly Meeting granted her wish. On May 20, 1775, Anna Gardner was disowned by the meeting, although her departure from the meeting was a mutual separation. Her marriage to Silvanus Gardner would last despite the disownment from the meeting, as the couple had six children, three girls and three boys. The couple was married for fifty-seven years, until Silvanus died in 1832. Anna would follow nine years later at the age of eighty-five. Her actions mirrored another female Friend, Mary Pinkham Clary, who the year before Anna Gardner was disowned. Like Gardner, Clary chose to be disowned for exogamy rather than satisfy the visitors from the meeting.<sup>169</sup> In these cases of public defiance, the women who rejected the authority of the meeting knew that their decisions came with serious public consequences. The meeting would record the transgression, the investigation, and the disownment in the minutes and records.

By refusing to acquiesce to the discipline of the women’s meeting, Anna asserted her autonomy and self-determination. She would not be controlled in the same way so many before her had been. This single act of resistance indicated a rise of individual self-determination and individual autonomy, in a way a return to the self-determinism found

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<sup>167</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends’ Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 5.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

in seventeenth-century Quaker proselytizing. Anna Gardner's act of defiance was a response to the Quaker elders of Nantucket. Since elders held a position of moral authority within the women's meeting, Anna Gardner's actions indicated a divide between elders and some of those Friends whom they oversaw and regulated. Elder women had maintained a moral integrity that placed them in such an exalted position. That moral integrity led to both men and women acknowledging their transgressions before the meeting in cases where the couple had married after their transgression.

In Anna Gardner's case, the hierarchy within the women's meeting demonstrated that no member was exempt from the meeting's regulations. Anna was the daughter of Jethro Folger and Mary Starbuck Folger. Mary Starbuck's father was Nathaniel Starbuck, Jr., who served for years in various positions of power both within the meeting and in the community. To further cement her pedigree within the Nantucket meeting, she was the great-granddaughter of Mary Coffin Starbuck, Nathaniel's mother.<sup>170</sup> Anna was a direct descendant of the founders of the meeting, and her family had a long history of holding positions of power within the meeting. For her to be challenged in such a way was quite bold of the meeting, as was her rejection of that challenge – both sides reflected and broadcast serious moral motivation.

Had Anna submitted to the discipline of the women's meeting and read a statement admitting that she was "guilty of unlawful intercourse," this story would not have been nearly as indicative of the struggle between female public authority in the meeting and personal agency among women, and it would not have served as a

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<sup>170</sup> Eliza Starbuck Barney Genealogical Record, available online from the Nantucket Historical Association, [www.nha.org](http://www.nha.org)

compelling narrative.<sup>171</sup> It would have been just one in dozens of cases of women yielding to the discipline of the meeting for marital transgressions. It also would not have served as a demonstration of the personal public defiance of authority so necessary in later reform movements. But her self-determination when it came to her sexuality, her choices, and her steadfast refusal to submit in the same way so many before her had done sets her action apart from others who faced fornication charges before the Nantucket Monthly Meeting. Anna Gardner's act of defiance and agency was a political one.

Friends still had to contend with a meeting set on regulating sexuality and a community that was, as before, populated by those who did not abide by the moral code of the meeting. What did change around this time was how the community addressed violations of the moral code of the community. The meeting minutes demonstrate how coy Nantucket Friends were about language when recording fornication cases, particularly before the 1760s and 1770s. More commonly used beginning in the 1770s, the use of the term "unlawful intercourse" was a far cry from the records showing that someone committed a "transgression" or a "folly," or "being concerned with" someone prior to marriage, which were the terms often used in the first half century of the Nantucket meeting. This more severe language suggests how strongly Nantucket Friends felt about fornication. If couples could engage in sexual relations and even have children outside of wedlock, it could threaten the educational and spiritual efficacy of marriage on the island. Such defiance by young women also indicated their refusal to accept the hierarchy of women as authorities and guides throughout their marriages. Little wonder

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<sup>171</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends' Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 4.

the women's meeting most strongly voiced those objections in the 1760s through the end of the eighteenth century, during the period of Quaker reform and a return to piety.

The paradox women faced was whether they would be best served obediently abiding by the women's meeting's leaders' standards of morality, or rejecting those they felt were unjust. Women who were older and had conducted themselves according to expectations of propriety and in their view of the Holy Spirit, such as marrying among Friends and avoiding fornication, held an elevated moral status and were among the leaders of the meeting. Maintaining a proper Quaker morality in sexuality and marriage served as another criterion in ascending the hierarchical ladder in the women's meeting. The presence of a moral hierarchy mandated by age and behavior led to issues amongst Quaker women on Nantucket. Generational and ideological differences arose, as indicated by Anna Gardner's resistance to the moral authority of the meeting. The meeting's increasing adherence and enforcement of strict behavioral conduct in the late eighteenth century saw Quakerism swimming against the Puritan tide.

The fornication cases in the first half-century of Quakerism on the island show as many couples as single individuals facing charges. In those instances where the meeting charged only one partner for fornication, more than half the cases were either of questionable consent, as with the case of Daniel Folger, or instances of exogamy, where the meeting had no authority over the other guilty partner.<sup>172</sup> For many couples, the birth of a child too soon after marrying was all the evidence the meeting needed. This presents a question of whether these couples had intended to marry before conception and chose not to wait until marrying, or if conception was the motivating factor behind the

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<sup>172</sup> *Quaker Committee Book of Objections*, Henry Barnard Worth Collection, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 35, Book 9.



declaration of marriage. The records cannot unveil the intent of the couple, and the timing of the birth of a couple's first child serves as the only possible clue to intent. Regardless of intent, the number of fornication charges in Quaker meetings well into the latter part of the eighteenth century indicates Quakers maintained a regulation on this transgression well after Puritan regulations had softened on disciplining fornication among people who eventually married. The meeting was likely also concerned that a couple engaging in sex before marriage, yet while in the midst of the Quaker investigation process, may have lied if asked about their sexual activities. For a community reliant on Truth as a fundamental tenet, lying during the investigation process was a serious and significant threat.

The fundamental question is whether these changes in the Nantucket Quaker community in the eighteenth century were in opposition to, or a return to, gender equality as mandated by George Fox. At its essence, the Society of Friends was designed to eliminate distinctions between Quakers, with all Friends being equal before God. As the women's meeting struggled to share power with the men's meeting, the opportunity for empowerment came from holding moral authority within the community. This proved to benefit those women who had lived lives of strict virtue. By establishing this moral authority, though, Quaker women on Nantucket were opening themselves to potential divisive issues. Such divisions only came after a hierarchy within the female community on Nantucket had already been established and was cemented by the early 1760s, with reformers holding positions of authority. An act of defiance, such as Anna Gardner refusing to submit to the meeting's mandate, was a reaction to that female hierarchy. Her choice in 1775 to leave rather than yield to the authority of the meeting vastly differs

from what both women and men had chosen over the previous half-century when faced with a similar decision. Before the 1760s, Tabitha Trott was the only woman disowned when she refused to denounce her second marriage after her first husband, a schoolteacher who had abandoned her and become a privateer, returned. Similarly, the meeting's action epitomized much more than the disownment of but one member of the Nantucket Monthly Meeting. Nantucket developed a culture of strictly and publicly disciplining marital transgressions that formed the basis of power found in the authority of the women's meeting. Yet the denial of the authority of the meeting by Anna Gardner and other women established the spirit of well thought-out public dissent also found in nineteenth century female activism.

Addressing acts of fornication by confronting those accused of this transgression in the public meeting and recording such instances in the minutes was only one of the means the Quaker meeting employed to defend the sanctity of marriage. The women's meeting also vetted a growing number of women who wished to join the Quaker meeting. The women's monthly meetings during the autumn of 1764 illustrate the growth of the Quaker community on the island over the course of the eighteenth century. In September of that year, Katharine Hooten and Christian Allen sought membership within the Quaker meeting. The next month, Mary Pinkham and Margaret Barker followed suit. Three of these women opted to join the Nantucket Monthly Meeting and, in some cases, the Society of Friends altogether, and would soon after marry a member of the Nantucket men's meeting. On October 29, 1764, Christian Allen "requesting of this meeting to come under the care of Friends, Mehetabel Pollard & Lois Macy are appointed to treat

with her thereabout and make return in writing to our next monthly meeting.”<sup>173</sup> The meeting placed its trust that the two women appointed, Mehetabel Pollard — who the minutes show had recently been named an elder by the women’s meeting — and Lois Macy, were qualified to objectively investigate the sincerity of Allen’s request.<sup>174</sup> At the next monthly meeting on November 26, “the friends appointed at our last monthly meeting to treat with Christian Allen respecting her coming under the Care of Friends, return answer to pretty good Satisfaction so that it is Concluded that she be admitted a Member of our Society.”<sup>175</sup> The very next line of the meeting minutes stated, “David Coffin and Christian Allen,” along with two other couples, “appeared and each couple Severally declared their Intentions of taking each other in Marriage.”<sup>176</sup> This request immediately following Allen’s admission into the Society of Friends suggests she intended to marry David Coffin as soon as she was admitted a member of the meeting. Mehetabel Pollard and Lois Macy returned “answer to pretty good Satisfaction,” allowing her to join and then immediately declare her intentions of marriage. Abigail Pinkham and Patience Gardner were “appointed to inspect into the clearness respecting Marriage of” Allen. At the December 31 women’s meeting, she was declared clear and allowed to marry David Coffin.

During that same December women’s meeting, committees charged to investigate Mary Pinkham and Margaret Barker, both of whom desired to join the

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<sup>173</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends’ Papers, 1672-1944*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 81-82.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 81. Being named an elder came with great responsibility, but there is no record in the minutes of any formal process or ceremony by which a Friend became an elder.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

Nantucket Monthly Meeting, returned positive reports. Both women were allowed into the Society, and, just as Christian Allen had done, they soon after declared their intentions to marry. Mary Pinkham and Reuben Folger wished to marry, and Margaret Barker and Paul Hussey had chosen to marry. At the January 28, 1765 meeting, both couples received the blessing of the women's meeting to marry.<sup>177</sup> The women's meeting displayed a willingness to accept these three new members into the fold. It was preferable to ensure children were raised in a holy Quaker home by integrating new Friends into the meeting — where they would live under the oversight and guidance (the meeting said “care”) of the women's meeting — than it was to see meeting members leave the meeting to marry.

The meeting was more willing to be inclusive, allowing outsiders to join, than it was to accept those from within who left. In a more proactive response to exogamy cases that had not come before Friends, the meeting would appoint multiple committees of overseers, demonstrating the level of scrutiny under which the meeting placed these women. When confronted, Friends who married out of meeting either had to acknowledge their transgression or they would be disowned. The meeting's more proactive approach was designed to reinstate those Friends who had fallen out of the good graces of the meeting. Such an overt strategy, however, only further angered Friends who were already on the fringes of Friends.<sup>178</sup> The *Book of Objections* indicates at least fifteen female and twenty-three male disownments between 1763 and 1807, with

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

<sup>178</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 115.

none listed before that date.<sup>179</sup> This does not include the several Friends who were not disowned but came under treatment of the meeting, or were recorded in the minutes of the women's meeting, which logged disownments for members who had married outside of Friends. It is also worth noting that the very public nature of the wedding process within the meeting could lead to instances of marrying contrary to the good order of Friends. Friends marrying each other but outside of the procedure prescribed by the meeting could discover themselves disciplined. The William Worth case from Chapter 3 provides an example of Friends marrying outside of Quaker procedure. In that case, it was because the bride's speech impediment made it either too difficult or too embarrassing to appear before the meeting and publicly declare her intent to marry Worth.

The language used in meeting minutes is also of interest, as it recognized a woman's married name even in accusing her of exogamy and expecting her to renounce her marriage outside of Friends. One example of this is in 1773, when the meeting had met with, "Anna Upham Wife of Jonathan Upham Jun'r. for Keeping Company With a Man of a Differing Perswation On Acct. of Marriage."<sup>180</sup> Anna Coffin had married outside of the meeting, as well as outside the Nantucket establishment. The Coffins had a long-standing legacy on the island, and the Uphams were relative newcomers without the deep roots other families had on the island. In May of 1773, Phebe Bunker, daughter of Paul Bunker, married Reuben Hussey. In this case, the "Visitors," those appointed to visit with Friends who acted contrary to the rules of the meeting, met with, "Phebe Hussey

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<sup>179</sup> *Quaker Committee Book of Objections, 1713-1894*, Henry Barnard Worth Collection, 1641-1905, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 35, Book 9.

<sup>180</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 125.

Daughter of Paul Bunker for Marrying Contrary to The good order and advice of Friends.”<sup>181</sup> The meeting minutes remained consistent in cases of exogamy, even when the offending woman was disowned, in that it recognized the married name of the woman despite rejecting the circumstances of the marriage. This is important because the women’s meeting recognized the legal status of marriage for those Friends who had married contrary to Quaker rules. The women’s meeting was drawing a line of distinction between the legal recognition of marriage in the world and its own, more strict, strictures on marriage.

In 1791, the New England Yearly Meeting took stronger action against those who married outside of Friends. The Nantucket Monthly Meeting received word from the New England Yearly Meeting that, “if any Friends shall marry Contrary to the good order established among us being previously Cautioned by the Overseers, that the monthly meeting where such belongs proceed to make a Minute of denial and testify against them.”<sup>182</sup> This was not the first time the yearly or quarterly meetings guided the Nantucket meeting toward more stringent enforcement of discipline. In 1772 and 1773, the quarterly meeting pushed for Nantucket Friends to more stringently discipline transgressions in individual behavior.<sup>183</sup> Maintaining control over marriage was an issue that extended not only to the monthly meeting on Nantucket but also to the larger governing body in Rhode Island. Exogamy — as well as marrying in a way that was not acceptable to Friends, even if it was among Friends — was a significant enough threat to

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>182</sup> *Nantucket Men’s Monthly Meeting, 1789-1824*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 4, 28.

<sup>183</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 116.

both the local monthly meetings and to the yearly meeting that such strong action was taken. The yearly meeting considered “these acts to be deliberate, & that thereby Monthly meetings are warranted in proceeding in this summary way.”<sup>184</sup> The epistles of the yearly meeting show how strongly Friends took the preservation of holy marriage, even if it came at the cost of membership within the meeting.

What can be argued about the way the meeting, in particular the women’s meeting, handled cases of exogamy is that the de facto hierarchy adhered to a program of education and discipline. From the 1760s on, discipline became as important as education as a primary focus of the women’s meeting in regulating marriage. It is still evident that the first priority of the elders as visitors within the women’s meeting was to ensure that Quaker women married Quaker men within the meeting procedure. Those Quaker men often came from the Nantucket meeting. But when that was not possible, properly vouched for Quaker husbands from other meetings would suffice as substitutes. It could be argued it was this emphasis on education that led the elders of the women’s meeting to allow the women who were interested in joining the meeting in 1764 to do so. The opportunity to bring young women not only into Quakerism, but also into the Nantucket meeting, may have been quite enticing. There was an opportunity in educating new Friends into the merits of Quaker Truth and the piety of holy marriage. This could explain why the meeting was so willing to accept women, as well as men, who joined the meeting and shortly thereafter declared their intentions to marry one of the meeting’s own. This provided another opportunity for women to receive education, through the women’s meeting, for future public business both within the meeting and in the

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<sup>184</sup> *Nantucket Men’s Monthly Meeting, 1789-1824*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 4, 28.

marketplace. For women to be indoctrinated into the Nantucket Quaker female culture toward a more outward presence in public there was a need for some level of education and leadership. The increased importance of the women's meeting in ensuring the preparedness of its membership for the administrative enforcement of Friends' shared faith can be seen through this process. This culture could be found in the administration and protocol of the meeting and in the practice of family visitation.

In a sense, the women's meeting had become a venue for public discussion, though in a more official capacity within the structure of the monthly meeting. Mary Coffin Starbuck spoke in public to joint meetings, her leadership within the religious community uncontested. Yet she would offer the disclaimer that she was not speaking solely for herself, but also on behalf of her husband. By the end of the eighteenth century, this limitation had evaporated for the most outspoken of women, like Keziah Coffin, who frequently expressed her opinions in public with no similar qualifier. It was through the women's meeting that such female independent public speech became permissible, even if it did raise some eyebrows.<sup>185</sup> From Quakerism's roots, George Fox supported the formation of women's meetings because there were subjects that needed to be openly discussed, but were best handled exclusively among women, including "ordering of their

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<sup>185</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989). Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990). 60. Fraser's challenge to Habermas' argument of the openness and accessibility of the public sphere to certain classes and categories of people, including women within certain places, is a central argument to her thesis. It is through this lens that the Nantucket Quaker women's meeting took on central importance to the education of women on the island, serving as a venue for open discussion of matters important to Quaker women. The women's meeting became a foundation for reform movements of the nineteenth century, with inside, private matters being turned out, or public.



children and families.”<sup>186</sup> These duties included treatment of children, discipline of women, and charity.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the willingness to accept converts and those who had transgressed is that the women’s meeting did not adopt an aura of exclusivity with regards to prospective husbands. It welcomed women into the community, knowing they could, and in many cases would, marry men from the island. This may indicate the female community was more unified than it was competitive, which would be consistent with the social, religious, and business network women created on Quaker Nantucket. Preserving the ideal holy marriage was of utmost importance, whether wives came from within the community or were transplants. The women’s meeting did investigate both brides-to-be and prospective female Quaker converts to preserve the vital institution of holy marriage within the meeting. Evidence of this exists in the wording of the investigations. Meeting elders charged with investigating prospective brides and grooms looked into their “clearness.”

As the meeting became a more central part of Nantucket society in the eighteenth century, women were at the core of the religious community. The earliest Quaker communities in England and the colonies developed a strong following of women, in part because of the increased role Quaker women could achieve within the society. Both the roles of elder in the women’s meeting and traveling minister gave women a position within Quaker communities that had no parallel in other Protestant churches. As Quakerism spread, it became increasingly mainstream by the establishment of the monthly meeting on Nantucket in 1708. That somewhat equalized the balance between

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<sup>186</sup> *Richardson Manuscript*, Haverford College Library, Special Collections, 7. In Mack, *Visionary Women*, 287.

men and women. The dangers of the whaling economy of Nantucket led to the death or absence of many men, and Nantucket faced issues of gender imbalance.

The gender imbalance among the Nantucket meeting's membership grew in the meeting's first decades. The disparity between women and men in the first meeting, with twenty-nine women and twenty-two men attending, grew, with twenty more women than men within ten years. "In looking over the women's list we come to a total of 47 in contrast to 27 – their attendance grew from one score to two score – about once again by half larger than the men's business Meeting in practice."<sup>187</sup> This gap continued into the middle of the eighteenth century, with the relocation of some Friends to the mainland starting in the 1760s, simultaneous to the reformer policies reaching the island. Still, these concerns regarding gender imbalance did not dissuade the women's meeting from accepting more women into their community, even as those women were almost immediately marrying men from the island — thus decreasing the available spouses for the women who were already part of the meeting. In this instance, the meeting was honoring the wishes of the men and women who declared their intentions, placing holy marriage as a higher priority than mere tribalism.

The Nantucket women's meeting was in a position of power regarding its membership. It had the flexibility of being welcoming of women from outside who wished to join, while punishing excluding those who left the meeting for marriage. Those women who persisted in refusing to acknowledge their transgressions in marrying outside the community — despite the efforts of the women's meeting to "treat" with them and discuss the offense — faced the real possibility of disownment, though leniency or inaction was sometimes the decision of the meeting. The threat of disownment

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<sup>187</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. V, 177.

perpetually existed for both women and men who married outside the community. In some instances, the exogamous marriage did not come to light to the community for some time, or was only dealt with after the exogamous marriage had ended, whether by death or for other reasons. Until the New England Yearly Meeting sent epistles to the monthly meetings in 1772 and 1773 persuading them to actively seek out those who married outside of Friends, often it was only when a person wished to re-enter the community that the previous marriage was addressed by the meeting — if the meeting even knew about the marriage, or the Friend, at all. With membership numbers imprecise but estimated in the low thousands into the 1760s, tracking all instances of exogamy, or even all members, would prove difficult. Yet, the Quaker reform movement's impact on both the New England Yearly Meeting and the Nantucket Monthly Meeting caused the leadership to be more proactive about seeking out those who had married outside of meeting, rather than ignoring the transgression. The control that the women's meeting held over who could be included within the community and who could not demonstrates a strong, cohesive organization. This more rigid discipline may have limited Friends' numbers, but it restored the denomination as a faith rooted in piety, and not a community lacking a strong theological backbone. Increasing the severity of discipline was a difficult decision that came with some costs, but reformers saw it as a necessary step. Along with more actively seeking out Friends who married out of meeting, membership by birthright became less of a guarantee during this same period of reform.

Much as E. Digby Baltzell described a social endogamy in both Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia, the same could be said for Quaker Nantucket. "As we shall see," noted Baltzell, "Lloyds, Logans, Norrises, Morrises, Pembertons, Fishers,

Cadwaladers, and Biddles were all inter-married in eighteenth-century Philadelphia.”<sup>188</sup> This same statement could be made about Starbucks, Macys, Coffins, Gardners, Folgers, Barnards, Colemans, Husseys, and Swains. Both the enormous profits of whale oil and the power found within the Quaker meeting were valuable treasures to protect. To some degree, the insular nature of marriage on the island caused the instances of “incest” that arose throughout the century, and led to disownments of both men and women for marrying cousins on account of both consanguinity and affinity. This is an example of Quaker marriage regulation being stricter than that of Puritans, as Puritans could in some instances approve of the marriages of marry first and second cousins. Before 1760, there were seven marriages between Folgers and Coffins, nine between Folgers and Gardners, and six between Coffins and Barnards recorded in the meeting minutes.<sup>189</sup> Before the influx of new Quakers into the meeting, as is evidenced in the 1764 minutes, the inclusion of new names into the meeting minutes was rare. Gorhams and Allens, both spelled a variety of ways, Joys, Clarks, Clasbys, and Streettons were rare compared to the many instances of Starbucks, Macys, Coffins, and other prominent families.

Quaker regulation against exogamy greatly limited the available pool of spouses for young Nantucketers. Friends could marry outside of their own meeting, but only with both parental permission and certification from the meeting. Marrying non-Quakers was a violation against the Society’s marital regulations, and could lead to disownment, as was marrying a Friend in a non-Quaker way — that is to say, by a minister from another denomination. Because of these limitations, “incest” became a major issue for the

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<sup>188</sup> E. Digby Baltzell, *Puritan Boston & Quaker Philadelphia* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 47.

<sup>189</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends’ Papers, 1672-1944*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10.

meeting, and was another issue the meeting regulated. The duality of religious and social endogamy on the island led to some marriages that challenged Quakers' own rules on what constituted incest. Definitions of "incest" can fluctuate, both by chronology and by geography. A marriage considered perfectly acceptable in some cultures, like that between cousins, can be labeled incestuous in others. In the introduction of his 2014 book *Domestic Intimacies: Incest and the Liberal Subject in Nineteenth-Century America*, Brian Connolly addresses the awkward problem of trying to define incest. He notes that the 1828 edition of Webster's dictionary placed incest in the context of the law. In other words, a relationship was only incestuous if it existed within a jurisdiction that prohibited it. Noah Webster's later attempts to rectify the problematic nature of this definition by removing the legal element of the definition, but incorporating words and phrases that made it even less clear than its predecessor. This new definition placed cohabitation as a necessary component of incest, while also stating that incestuous relationships were "within prohibited degrees of kindred," while not defining what those degrees were, or even who established those degrees.<sup>190</sup> Because of the difficulties in defining incestuous relationships, I will use the terms "incest" and "incestuous" in this dissertation only in reference to sexual relationships prohibited by the Quaker meeting, or in comparisons with prohibitions found in other religious communities without any external connotations or judgments.

At the onset of the Nantucket Monthly Meeting in 1708, there was no established Quaker definition of incest, though from the late seventeenth century, Friends had sought

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<sup>190</sup> Brian Connolly, *Domestic Intimacies: Incest and the Liberal Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 1-2.

restrictions on cousin marriage.<sup>191</sup> Pennsylvania passed statutes in 1682 and 1700 against incestuous relations, but remained vague as to what defined incest.<sup>192</sup> This gave a certain amount of leniency to yearly and local meetings to establish their own definitions of what constituted incest. In accordance with both English statutes and Biblical precedent, Quakers “forbade a man to marry his mother, his father’s sister, his mother’s sister, and the daughter of a son or daughter.”<sup>193</sup> These were deemed forbidden because of the blood relation between the partners. The scriptural roots for such prohibitions, both consanguineal and affinal, can be found in Leviticus. The precedent also forbade a man from marrying “his father’s wife (who was not his mother), his son’s wife, his son’s daughter (even if he were only the stepfather), his wife’s daughter, the daughter of his wife’s daughter or son. There unions were outlawed because of affinity.”<sup>194</sup>

There was little difference in how the meeting viewed incest by consanguinity and incest by affinity. Consanguinity, or blood relation, extended to four degrees, and restrictions on consanguineal marriage existed in Christian doctrine in some form since early Christendom. English legal regulations against both consanguineal and affinal marriage became part of Massachusetts law in 1695. After a contentious debate, the colonial government drafted an act based on a table created by Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury. His sixteenth-century *Table of Kindred and Affinity* established early Anglican regulations on marriage, and extended well into relations by affinity. It included the consanguineous relations of grandparent, parent, sibling, child,

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<sup>191</sup> Martin Ottenheimer, *Forbidden Relatives: The American Myth of Cousin Marriage* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Frost, 160.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

grandchild, aunt or uncle, and niece or nephew. Although nieces were not included in Leviticus, on which this table was based, such marriages were prohibited in both Archbishop Parker's table and in the 1695 statute.<sup>195</sup> The act did not specifically address marriage between first cousins, or "cousins-german," however. Justice Samuel Sewall of the Massachusetts Superior Court found this absence to be appalling, as he and others argued that marriage between cousins was as close in relation as other affinal relations barred from marriage. Sewall argued that even the local indigenous peoples did not make a practice of marrying first cousins — a pointed, and racial, statement about this omission.<sup>196</sup> Yet, his argument fell on deaf ears, as cousins "have never been added to the list of prohibited marriage partners in Massachusetts."<sup>197</sup>

The prohibitions in Massachusetts toward affinal marriage, or relation by marriage rather than by blood, were even more encompassing. Two-thirds of the restricted partners on Parker's table, and similarly in the 1695 act, were affinal. The most contentious of these was the restriction on marrying the sibling of a deceased spouse — as was the case with John Waterman, whose transgression is documented later in this chapter. Opponents of the prohibition argued that a widower's sister-in-law, in particular, was the ideal person to help raise children in the absence of a deceased mother. An aunt was often of a suitable age in comparison to her deceased sister, and already had an established relationship with the children. In many cases, an unmarried sister also already lived in the same home as the family. Since it had been such a natural fit, there had been several such marriages previous to the 1695 act. Still, unlike the debate over marriage

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<sup>195</sup> Ottenheimer, 19-23.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

between first cousins, the more stringent regulations passed in this instance, nullifying those marriages that had already taken place between mostly widowers and sisters-in-law.<sup>198</sup> This most common marriage of affinity became outlawed, despite the practical advantages argued by proponents of such unions.

A more accurate account of Quaker attitudes toward the governing of incestuous marriage comes from Pennsylvania. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Quakers held a majority in the assembly. Unlike in the legal system in Massachusetts, where Quakers were in the minority and held little political power, Pennsylvania's colonial laws showed a strong Quaker influence. From the colony's inception in 1682, there were established laws against incestuous marriage. A 1700 statute further codified the ban on incestuous marriages. Those laws, however, "did not clearly define what relationships were incestuous and were disallowed for vagueness."<sup>199</sup> This ambiguity was addressed in the 1705 passage of more specific and strict laws, a section of Smith's Laws. That statute outlined consanguineal and affinal relations that were banned, drawing on English civil law from more than a century prior. "By the first half of the eighteenth century the Quakers had added to the list of prohibited relatives."<sup>200</sup> Included in these more stringent restrictions was a ban on first cousins marrying. Martin Ottenheimer states in *Forbidden Relatives: The American Myth of Cousin Marriage* that "Quakers had been opposed to cousin marriage."<sup>201</sup> This guided both the legal restrictions

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.



on first cousins marrying in Pennsylvania and the eventual efforts by Quaker meetings to outlaw the practice.

Why did Quaker meetings take such a strong stance against marriage between close relations, even a stronger stance than those taken by other religious communities? Because Friends view marriage from a religious context, while other Protestant sects considered marriage to be civil, Quaker regulations on kinship marriage were more likely to be steadfastly based on scripture. As such, Puritans and Anglicans were more likely to allow for at least second and third cousins to wed, if not first cousins, whereas both yearly and monthly Quaker meetings even restricted these more distant relations from marrying. That is not to say that Friends were strict scripturalists. When faced with contradictions, Friends placed their faith in the Inner Light as experienced in the unanimity of converted people in the community.

The 1721 marriage between Abigail Folger and Daniel Folger within the neophyte Nantucket Monthly Meeting illustrated the meeting's hesitation at sanctioning a union between first cousins. The couple was only the twenty-second to approach the meeting for permission to marry, and one of the first to face the scrutiny of the meeting for their decision by marrying without having the full unity of the meeting.<sup>202</sup> Daniel Folger was two years older than Abigail, the couple still in their teens when they married. Of greater importance to the meeting was their relation. Daniel and Abigail were first cousins, once removed. Abigail's paternal grandparents, Peter Folger and Mary Morrall, were also Daniel's paternal great-grandparents. This was enough of a concern to the harmony of the

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<sup>202</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10. 11. *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 31.

community that both meetings — although permitting the couple to marry — made special note of the lack of full unity the couple had in marrying first cousins.

The women's meeting noted that the investigation by Experience Coffin and Sarah Barnard approved the marriage, though it recorded that "they are permitted to proceed tho not in full unity of friends."<sup>203</sup> This was a creative solution to a meeting that was not unified either in favor of or against this marriage. It offered the women's meeting a third category, one in which this couple was seen as members of the community, but with a notation that may have denied full unity. The men's meeting also notes that the couple was permitted to marry, although that permission similarly came with some apprehension. It is recorded that, "friends having deliberated considered the matter do in Condecention tolerate & permitt them to proceed they being ney of kin."<sup>204</sup> Even without full unity of Friends, the couple had fifteen male and sixteen female witnesses who signed their certificate at their wedding, including eleven Folgers by name.<sup>205</sup> The wedding itself was held in the home of John Folger, he having given his blessing for his daughter to marry her cousin. It is even recorded in the marriage record that the couple was allowed to proceed because both bride and groom were "appearing Clear of all others and having consent of Parents."<sup>206</sup> In this instance, Daniel Folger's father, Peter Folger, had already died, but the three surviving parents all gave their consent. Daniel is listed in

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<sup>203</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 11.

<sup>204</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 31.

<sup>205</sup> *A Book of Records of the Certificates of Friends Marriages on the Island of Nantucket, by Order of the Meeting of Friends of Said Island, 1708-1755*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 15, 21.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

the marriage certificate as, “Daniel Folger the Son of Peter Folger of Nantucket in the Province of the Massachusetts Bay in New England Deceased.”<sup>207</sup>

The case of Captain Folger and his wife may have been a marriage of necessity. Robert Leach and Peter Gow states in *Quaker Nantucket* that the couple were “‘double’ first cousin(s),” meaning they were by two relations first cousins.<sup>208</sup> She would give birth “somewhat sooner than nine months later.”<sup>209</sup> This transgression led to the public acknowledgment in the second monthly men’s meeting (April) of 1723, where the minutes recorded the whaler’s confession.

I speak from a sorrowfully affected heart being convicted of my Transgression against the Lord with Respect of my behaviour with her that is my wiffe. Therefore I find myself und obligation to make acknowledgment to the Lord who sees all the actions of all those that Transgress against him & also to Condem the action among God’s people by Reason it being Contrary to Christ’s Command.<sup>210</sup>

In this instance, the acknowledgment was for the sin of fornication, not incest. It was because he was “concerned with she that is his wife before being married.”<sup>211</sup> The previous notation in the minutes regarding their relation was not brought up again, and the entirety of the couple’s discord with the meeting pertained to their anxiety.

The hesitation of both business meetings over the marriage of Abigail and Daniel Folger came on the heels of another controversy. In the meeting immediately preceding

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 41.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> *Nantucket Men’s Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 38.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

the sixth month (August) meeting where Abigail and Daniel Folger received permission to marry, although not receiving the full unity of Friends, Mary Gorham and Andrew Gardner met the same fate. Mary Gorham's mother's paternal grandparents were Andrew Gardner's paternal grandparents, Richard Gardner and Sarah Shattuck. Despite the generational differences, the couple was close in age. No mention is made of the couple's relation in the notes of the women's meeting. It is only noted that couple was, "tolerated & permitted to pass."<sup>212</sup> The men's meeting was more specific in noting the opposition of some to the union. That body stated that the couple, "are tolerated to marry (& not in full unity they being second cousins)"<sup>213</sup> The meeting's notation in its minutes that the couple did not marry in full unity suggests that those who opposed such a marriage felt it necessary not only to voice their opposition in public during the meeting but also that their stance against the couple's desired union should remain on perpetual record. In this situation, this is analogous to a vote against a measure that was going to pass, ensuring that unanimity and full unity were not reached. It is also a demonstration of the autonomy of the women's meeting. The men's meeting recorded in its minute of the union that it was not with the full unity of Friends. Such was not the case for the women's meeting, where no such notation is made, despite the women's meeting having used a similar notation in minutes regarding other marriages. This is an instance of the women's meeting recording an opinion that differed in language from that of the men's meeting, and demonstrates its willingness to publicly exhibit autonomy. Defining the couple as "second cousins" is noteworthy, as well, considering that in twenty-first century lexicon,

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<sup>212</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 11.

<sup>213</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 31.

the couple would be considered first cousins once removed. The couple was related in the same way as Abigail and Daniel Folger, where one partner's grandparents were the other's great-grandparents.

Even with the passage of civil statutes regulating marriage, the New England Yearly Meeting's epistles were not as direct about its stance on these types of marriages, including marriage between cousins, first or more distant. Individual yearly meetings addressed this issue, or, in some cases, requested an epistle from its governing yearly meeting. In 1722, in the wake of the Daniel Folger incident, the Nantucket Monthly Meeting sought clarification from the New England Yearly Meeting. The meeting reported on a level of clarification from the yearly meeting dating back to the years 1708 and 1709, when the Nantucket Monthly Meeting was still in its infancy. The epistle brought before the monthly meeting from the yearly meeting stated:

Relating to Marrings in the kin being Considered it is Concluded as followeth viz: With respect to the Degrees of Consanguinity do not find freedom at present to make any alteration & with respect to affinity, it is Concluded the Meening & intent of Said Minit was only to restraine the Marrying a Mans wiffes Brother or Sisters Daughter, or a womans husbands brother or sisters Son.<sup>214</sup>

The New England Yearly Meeting established regulations against marrying cousins. "No man could marry his own first or second cousin or the first or second cousin of his wife."<sup>215</sup> Furthermore, "New England's discipline asked that even third cousins not marry, and advised meetings to discourage although not forbid wedlock between second cousins."<sup>216</sup> Given its tendency at times to be more lenient, the, "Rhode Island Monthly

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>215</sup> Frost, 161.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

Meeting did permit children of first cousins to marry in 1728.”<sup>217</sup> Despite some attempts to create universal standards on what constituted incest, there was still quite a bit of autonomy for more localized yearly and monthly meetings to define incest as they saw fit. The Rhode Island meeting’s permission of what the Nantucket meeting felt was worthy of at least not having full unity of Friends, if not a refusal of marriage, points to the varied interpretations of incestuous marriage by monthly meetings even within the same yearly meeting.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1722 clarification regarding the yearly meeting’s regulation on incest, the meeting minutes continued to record marriages that did not have the full unity of Friends because of the close relation of the couple. In 1724, the meeting dispatched prominent Friend Nathaniel Starbuck and his committee partner Batchelor Hussey to serve as witnesses for the wedding of Daniel Pinkham and Eunice Starbuck. The witnesses reported that the wedding was “performed in the manner used among friends & in as good order as could wel be under their circumstance they being ney of kin.”<sup>218</sup> This is another example of the Nantucket meeting creating a category of acceptance, but with reservations. In this instance, it is the men’s meeting that is expressing concern over the closeness in relation of the couple. The couple had been investigated by both the men’s and women’s meetings, and no mention was made in the meeting minutes of their close relation, nor was there any delay in investigating the couple. In this case, the couple was second cousins. Daniel Pinkham’s mother, Mary Coffin, was the daughter of James Coffin. Eunice Starbuck’s father, Jethro Starbuck, was

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> *Nantucket Men’s Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 42.

the son of Mary Coffin. James and Mary were siblings, both the children of Tristram Coffin and Dionis Stevens. This made Eunice Starbuck and Daniel Pinkham second cousins, sharing a set of great-grandparents. In this case, being second cousins was worthy of notation in the meeting minutes. This was not the first instance of such low degree incest in this family tree, though. Eunice Starbuck's parents themselves were first cousins. Eunice's mother, Dorcas Gayer, was the daughter of Dorcas Starbuck, who was the daughter of Edward Starbuck and Catherine Reynolds. Conversely, Eunice's father, Jethro Coffin, was the son of Nathaniel Starbuck, who was also the offspring of Edward Starbuck and Catherine Reynolds. That couple married in 1694, though, and may not have endured the investigation of the Nantucket meeting had they married after its establishment, and therefore their union was neither approved nor condemned by that meeting.

Marriage among more distant cousins became more commonplace on Nantucket as the first quarter of the eighteenth century closed. In 1725, Nathaniel Gardner married Mary Folger, although once more, this was not in the full unity of Friends. Nathaniel Gardner's paternal grandparents were also Mary Folger's paternal grandmother's parents. This made the couple first cousins, once removed. Once again, the couple's common ancestry was Richard Gardner and Sarah Shattuck, as it was for Mary Gorham and Andrew Gardner. For that matter, the couple was also linked to Abigail and Daniel Folger, as Mary Folger and Daniel Folger were sister and brother. Meanwhile, Mary Folger's husband, Nathaniel Gardner, was the brother of Andrew Gardner. In this sense, all three couples faced some mention in the meeting's minutes for marrying cousins.

Each of those cases involved marriages where one spouse's great-grandparents were the other's grandparents, making them first cousins once removed.

The meeting does not address the nature of its objections to these marriages, aside from noting they were not in full unity of the meeting. It is possible there were concerns regarding the consolidation of power within the meeting and wealth into a small number of families, ensuring those families would wield almost unchallengeable power on the island, but such concerns are not recorded by the meeting. There is a common link among siblings to the other marriages. The men's meeting also was the body responsible for making note of the close relation. As was in the case of the other two, there was a notation of the closeness of the couple within the men's minutes of the investigation. The couple was "allowed & tolerated to proceed (tho not in full unity (they being somewhat ney of kin) in the way of friends."<sup>219</sup> The concerns of the meeting regarding the "incestuous" nature of the marriages were only recorded in the men's meeting minutes, and not in the minutes of the women's meeting, despite the women's meeting investigating the brides as the men's meeting did the grooms. In the case of the marriage of Abigail Folger and Daniel Folger, there is a notation in the women's meeting minutes that the couple was not marrying with the full unity of Friends, but there is no reason offered for that disunity being mentioned in the women's meeting minutes. For Andrew Gardner and Mary Gorham, as well as for Nathaniel Gardner and Mary Folger, the women's meeting does not even note any disunity in the investigation, again showing that the two meetings were autonomous.

The New England Yearly Meeting was in the process of dissuading its members, through the monthly meetings, from allowing cousins to marry coincidentally with

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 47.



Nantucket's monthly meeting facing several cases of "second cousins," or first cousins once removed, seeking to marry. These couples seeking to marry were allowed to proceed, so the New England Yearly Meeting's recommendations did not appear to carry the full weight of an outlaw of cousin marriage. Indeed the men's and women's meetings were faced with a difficult problem – allow marriages that co-religionists thought were incestuous or alternatively to watch their community members marry outside of meeting or seek religious outsiders, thus destroying the marriage discipline and the basis for the island's religious education altogether. The men's meeting assumed a greater role in establishing the discipline for local meetings, assuming all responsibilities for the notation of marriages that were not in full unity of Friends. In this sense, the women's meeting faced a paradox. It was charged with ensuring the clearness of its female membership to marry, having the authority to appoint committees and conduct investigations. Meanwhile, the men's meeting assumed the responsibility to interpret and enforce the epistle received from the yearly meeting. The creative means within the Nantucket meeting of offering approval, but without unity or with noted reservations, gave women the authority to handle that paradox by exhibiting their public autonomy, not always acquiescing to the ruling of the men's meeting.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the women's meeting would struggle with either submitting to the authority of the men's meeting or enacting its own discipline as pertains to incest. The women's meeting increased the severity of its discipline in the 1760s, more quickly issuing disownments and publicly noting transgressions over the final four decades of the eighteenth century. The seventh women's monthly meeting of 1773 set aside the marriage of Dinah Folger Jenkins, the daughter of Abishai Folger and

Dinah Coffin. Dinah Folger Jenkins married Seth Jenkins. Her paternal grandparents, Nathan Folger and Sarah Church, were Seth Jenkins' maternal grandparents, making the couple first cousins. The women's meeting issued the discipline against Dinah Folger Jenkins, accusing her of:

Going Contrary to the Good Order & Advice of Friends In  
Marrying her first Cousin But She Refusing to Make any  
Satisfaction S'd Cause Is Submitted to the Judgment of This  
Meeting It's Therefore the Mind of This Meeting That She be Set  
Aside and no Longer Esteem'd a Member of This Society Untill  
Friends Shall Recieve further Satisfaction from her.<sup>220</sup>

In this case, the women's meeting handled the disciplining of its own. The bluntness of the recorded incest, and the swift and decisive manner in which the women's meeting dealt with a transgression from one of its own, is indicative of a path deviating greatly from the one taken by the women's meeting in the early part of the century. Disownments for marrying cousins continued to the end of the eighteenth century, including multiple cases of disownments in 1794 and 1795, specifically stating the reason for the disownments was for marrying a cousin. In some of these cases, the meeting disowned both the husband and the wife — if both members of the monthly meeting. Paul Ray and his first cousin and wife, Priscilla Macy Ray, were disowned in 1794 for that offense.<sup>221</sup> In 1795, Thaddeus Joy and Judith Folger Joy were likewise dismissed for their “incestuous” marriage, being first cousins. Again, the records state that he was “disowned

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<sup>220</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 121.

<sup>221</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends' Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 5, 19. *A Record of the Births, Deaths, Disownments, & Removals Alphabetically Arranged in the Society of Friends on the Island of Nantucket*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 20, 155, 188.

for marrying his first cousin,” and that, “she was also disowned.”<sup>222</sup> This increased diligence over the course of the late eighteenth century in disowning cousins who had married is indicative of just how much of a threat Quakers came to believe incestuous marriage was, and served as another example of the increased morality of the Quaker reform movement.

Further definitions disallowed men from marrying their deceased wife’s sister, an issue that arose with John Waterman in 1762 and 1763.<sup>223</sup> As J. William Frost states in *The Quaker Family in Colonial America*, there were significant restrictions on a man being able to marry relatives of his wife, whether she was deceased or the marriage had ended in the eyes of the meeting.<sup>224</sup> John Waterman’s first wife, Elisabeth Beard Waterman, died at the age of 23 in 1759. She left him with two children, a boy and a girl. By 1762, the meeting had learned that he was living with his deceased wife’s sister, Mary, who was five years younger than her deceased older sister. Despite having two young children to raise on his own, the notion of him cohabitating with his sister-in-law was too lascivious for the meeting to ignore. At the end of 1762 and early in 1763, both the men’s and the women’s meetings sought to show the couple the errors of their ways, and convince them to recant their “incestuous” marriage, which was prohibited by Friends as well for being out of meeting, their union being common law and not having been performed by Quaker tradition.

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<sup>222</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends’ Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 5, 10. *A Record of the Births, Deaths, Disownments, & Removals Alphabetically Arranged in the Society of Friends on the Island of Nantucket*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 20, 96, 144.

<sup>223</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends’ Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 5.

<sup>224</sup> Frost, 160.

The meeting had “received information from the visitors that they have treated with J(ohn) W(aterman) on account of his illegally cohabiting as man & wife with M(ary) B(eard) sister to his former wife. Friends declare they have no unity with them.”<sup>225</sup> The use of the term “cohabitating” indicates the couple did not have a formally recognized marriage. Rather, when the couple was denied permission by the meeting to marry because the bride was the sister of the groom’s deceased first wife, the couple drafted an unofficial marriage certificate and had the attendees sign it.<sup>226</sup> The couple in essence held a Quaker wedding without the permission of the meeting. By the end of January 1763, Mary Beard was also disowned, as she likewise did not satisfy the meeting that she understood the severity of her transgression, nor was she willing to renounce her cohabitation with her former brother-in-law, another example of a woman publicly denouncing religious authority and remaining within the community.

In 1791, Judith Starbuck Coffin was disowned for marrying her late husband’s brother, an act that was considered “Inconsistent with our Religious profession.”<sup>227</sup> Her first husband, Eliakim, was lost at sea in 1784, the couple having one young daughter, Clarissa. Seven years later, she married his older brother Bartlett. This act, despite her having a young child and seven years having passed since her first husband’s death, was considered sufficiently inconsistent with Friends’ order as to lead to her disownment. Marriage in this context had to be an expression of the Inner Light and a manifestation of spiritual love to truly be a holy Quaker marriage, and the meeting determined this

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<sup>225</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends’ Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 5, 5.

<sup>226</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 106.

<sup>227</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends’ Papers, 1672-1944*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 21, 73.

marriage did not meet these more rigid theological expectations, especially in the era of increased discipline of the late eighteenth century.

The rationale for this stance against marrying former sisters-in-law, Frost argues, is Biblical. He points to scripture that stated, “when a man and woman married, they became one, and so Quakers declared (along with many other Protestants) that a man was as closely related to his wife’s sister or her children by a previous marriage as his mate was.”<sup>228</sup> Furthermore, a man “could not marry his own kin to four degrees; so also he could not marry his wife’s.”<sup>229</sup> This was consistent throughout other meetings in the Quaker world. The Shrewsbury Quarterly Meeting in New Jersey, for example, asked in 1759 and 1760, “whether the acknowledgment of a man who married his former wife’s half-sister should be accepted.”<sup>230</sup> The answer to that question was that the meeting had to refuse membership. It was in the 1750s into 1760 — a time of great change within the Nantucket meeting, as well — that meetings in the Delaware Valley entered into debates over whether restrictions against marriage between those not related by blood were too confining. Frost addresses this split between Friends, stating that it was the urban Friends in Philadelphia, often seen as less conservative than their brethren from the surrounding rural meetings, who held onto tradition, while the rural meetings sought a softening of the yearly meeting’s stance on the issue. Demographic factors may have led to these juxtaposed positions. Philadelphia, being the more urban area with a larger population and a merchant class allowing for greater contact with other areas, gave greater opportunities of finding available spouses. On the other hand, the agrarian regions spread

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<sup>228</sup> Frost, 160-161.

<sup>229</sup> Frost, 161.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

across the Delaware Valley did not afford its members the same opportunities to find mates. This difference may have led to Philadelphia seeking to hold onto tradition, while rural Friends, out of a greater necessity, sought change. Ultimately, the Friends in Philadelphia held a sufficient majority and won the day, holding fast to regulations against marrying the non-blood relatives of deceased spouses.

Nantucket took a similar stance as Philadelphia, holding onto the notion that the four degrees of kin extended beyond bloodlines. The meeting's stance on endogamy limited available spouses. This, combined with the geographical isolation of Nantucket, led to a high percentage of the island's inhabitants being related, whether by blood or by marriage. In *Letters From an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur illustrates the pitfalls of an endogamous community. As late as 1782, when Crèvecoeur drafted his letters, he argues that a, "majority of the present inhabitants are the descendants of the twenty-seven first proprietors, who patented the island."<sup>231</sup> Crèvecoeur also observes an ethnic homogeny on the island, noting that, "here are neither Scotch, Irish, nor French, as is the case in most other settlements; they are an unmixed English breed."<sup>232</sup> This was not quite the full story, as intermarriage with Quakers from Newport and Boston did allow for some level of diversity. Joseph Rotch married into the Macy and Coffin families, taking Love Macy, daughter of Thomas Macy and Deborah Coffin Macy, as his bride in 1733. Rotch came from the mainland, and was Scottish in descent.<sup>233</sup> But the endogamous marital patterns

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<sup>231</sup> J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer* (Garden City, N.Y.: Dolphin Books, 1963), 155.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 68.

of the Quaker community on the island made such ethnic pluralism in marriage more the exception than the rule.

The closeness that Crèvecoeur observed developed into a cultural acceptance of affined language. A lexicon emerged on the island that would place Friends not only as bound spiritually but also in what Lisa Norling referred to as tribalism.<sup>234</sup> Crèvecoeur spoke of Nantucketers calling each other by familiar names, such as aunt or uncle, or cousin.<sup>235</sup> The protective nature of the community led to bonds stronger than those of just a religious sect. Nantucket's Friends were indeed related, both spiritually and in reality. This language suggests a paradox in the attitudes of Friends toward incestuous marriage. On one hand, the insular nature of endogamy prevalent on the island, along with the adoption of familial names in lieu of more distant salutations for acquaintances, indicates an acceptance, and perhaps even an embrace, of the incestuous situation on the island. On the other hand, the meeting's strict regulations against marrying relations, even second and third cousins and those who were not blood relatives, would insinuate a disapproval of the practice. This uncertainty about incestuous marriage was common of eighteenth-century attitudes toward the practice, and mirrored popular sentiment, legal regulations, and literary works.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Norling, 72.

<sup>235</sup> Crèvecoeur, 155-156.

<sup>236</sup> Mary Jean Corbett, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 13. Modern scholarship has focused study of incest on either closer relationships than the ones found on Nantucket — such as consensual sibling or parent-child sexual relations outside of marriage (including sentiments of Oedipal desire) — or non-consensual incest, often linked to rape and child sexual abuse. Mary Jean Corbett's *Family Likeness* speaks to both marrying siblings of deceased spouses and cousins, although her work extends into the nineteenth century. She suggests a classist need to maintain social immobility in nineteenth-century England, building on Ann Laura Stoler's examination of endogamy as a means of protecting racial identity in her works, *Race and the Education of Desire* and *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*. Corbett argues the middle class allowed for both cousin marriages and wedding a deceased wife's sister as, "potentially positive strategies for

If we were to accept the conclusion that Nantucket Friends lessened restrictions on incestuous marriage to preserve Quaker endogamy, it should be asked why attitudes toward incest became more restrictive over time. What had been worthy of a notation in the minutes during the investigative process in the first half-century of the meeting became a sin in the harshest terms from the 1760s to the end of the 1700s. As the community became more prosperous and more populous, and as generations were further removed from the twenty-seven proprietors who founded the island and the group of nine who chartered the monthly meeting, opportunities to marry beyond first, second, and even third cousins grew. The expansion of voyages and the island's place as a center of whaling economy only added to that, providing even more opportunities to marry outside of kin. The requests made by some to join the meeting on Nantucket in the middle of the 1760s indicate the increased opportunity and availability of spouses.

The meeting was near its peak in membership, although, as Robert Leach warns, on Nantucket, “(n)o fully accurate lists were kept before 1765 and no proper application was received from those who wished to be considered full members.”<sup>237</sup> Furthermore, the means in which most children joined the ranks in any official way was to declare their intent to marry. Still, the numbers of those attending meeting ascended, and the

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preserving bourgeois morality and health.” This classism mirrored Stover’s argument regarding European attempts to maintain racial purity within its colonial possessions. Stover argued a “white endogamy” forced communities with limited options regarding spouses of the same race, but an abundance of potential non-European spouses, to accept marriages among cousins and between siblings-in-law, if the common link was deceased. Since neither canon nor English civil law expressly prohibited either practice, it was the purview of individual communities whether to allow such marriage. It was far more palatable for colonizers to see marriages between two Europeans who were cousins than to permit racially exogamous marriages that could threaten the racial homogeneity of the community. In the same sense, Friends on Nantucket sought a religiously homogenous community, and permitted marriages that it may have otherwise refused. Limited options of potential spouses, particular among Friends, made this a necessity to preserve the religious identity of the community, in the same manner in which colonizers sought to maintain racial purity, and nineteenth-century middle class English protected their class identity from the intrusions of the working class.

<sup>237</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. VIII, 9.



meetinghouse was increased in 1764 to hold up to 2,000 Friends.<sup>238</sup> Improvements in whaling technology created tremendous wealth for the island, particularly the Quaker community, which thrived in whaling while merchants in other ports focused their resources on the triangle trade.

The restriction placed on both consanguineal and affinal incest by the Quaker meeting on Nantucket was just part of the severity of marital regulations within the community. Lisa Norling argues that “(w)hat bothered the reforming Friends on Nantucket by far the most, again like their coreligionists elsewhere, were violations of the Quaker rules regarding marriage.”<sup>239</sup> Regarding incest, “(f)ive women and two men were disowned for marrying first cousins, which violated the Quaker ban against marriage with near relations.”<sup>240</sup> Quaker regulations on incest were more severe than Puritan laws from the mainland. At least regarding marital regulations, and in particular incestuous marriage, Puritans were more lenient in their establishment of civil law, and Quakers — both legally in Pennsylvania and in many local meetings, including Nantucket — created more restrictive regulations regarding the choice of one’s spouse. The women’s meeting, being responsible for enforcing these restrictions, developed a culture of moral education, as one generation of female elders and visitors passed down the responsibilities for maintaining the community’s moral compass to the next generation. This is a role that has often been lost in the discussion, but set forth the example for later Nantucket women to follow. Indeed, in marriage regulation Nantucket women (the regulators and the regulated) faced all of the issues that compose a good Jane Austen novel or a viable

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<sup>238</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 97-98.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

religious community — the coming together of spirituality, sex, status, ethics, and money and the divine.

## CHAPTER 6

### HOLY WOMEN GOVERNING MARRIAGE: BIGAMY AND DIVORCE

Even with strong female leadership on the island, Nantucket women faced difficulties not found to the same degree in other Quaker communities. Women on Nantucket faced lengthy spousal separations because of the island's whaling economy. These separations became lengthier as the eighteenth century progressed, especially with whaling voyages extending from a few months to two years or more. Long absences and the lure of the sea led to troubled marriages including cases of bigamy, which, like fornication, exogamy, and incest, were regulated by the Quaker meeting and such regulation provided public women with an education in social reality and in deciding publicly how to manage it politically. When couples were often together or often apart, many lose a holy love or even unholy tolerance for each other and seek divorce. The public regulation of separation and togetherness in island marriages well prepared Nantucket's public women for the hardest cases of American social reform.

The first bigamy case for the Quaker meeting on Nantucket came in 1713, when Tabitha Trott married Dr. Joseph Brown. The problem for these newlyweds was that Trott had been married to another man, a schoolteacher-turned-privateer named John Frost. As Robert Leach suggests in his work *Quaker Nantucket*, it is "possible" this second marriage was conducted in the Quaker way, although the Nantucket meeting disapproved.<sup>241</sup> In Tabitha Trott's case, whether John Frost was a Quaker or not, she remained a member of the meeting. After having two children with Tabitha, Frost left his home and his family to become a privateer, and was presumed to be either lost at sea or

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<sup>241</sup> *Robert Leach Papers*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. V, 99-100.

an absconder of his family responsibilities when Tabitha made the decision to marry another man.

By Massachusetts law, Frost could have been declared deceased after an absence of three years, which is another example of the strictness of Quaker regulation trumping in vigor the Puritanical civil authority on Nantucket. Presuming her husband dead, which was permitted by Massachusetts law but not Quaker regulation, Tabitha welcomed Dr. Brown's courtship and married him. Her presumption was shared, as it is noted that "Tabitha Trott, widow of John Frost" married Dr. Joseph Brown. The officiant was John Coffin, "justice of peace."<sup>242</sup> As this marriage was conducted by a Justice of the Peace, it was not a Quaker marriage in form. John Frost reemerged on the island in 1713, though, much to the surprise of the inhabitants — especially the newlywed couple.<sup>243</sup>

The result of this scandal was a charge of bigamy leveled against Tabitha. Although she had married outside of Quaker dictates, the meeting only addressed the charge of bigamy. The meeting found that she had "in an un-Christian and unlawful manner proceeded to take a man (as she saith to be her lawful husband) which un-Christian action we deny and shall not stand charged with her until unfeigned Repentance."<sup>244</sup> That charge, and that her second marriage was essentially declared null and void, forced Tabitha and Joseph Brown to flee to Newport, Rhode Island. Newport was a logical destination for the troubled couple, as it was a thriving maritime community, just as Nantucket was. It also had strong Quaker roots, being the home of the

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<sup>242</sup> *Early Settlers of Nantucket: Their Associates and Descendants*, ed. Lydia S. Hinchman, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1901), 250.

<sup>243</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 53.

<sup>244</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 57.

New England Yearly Meeting. The port had a growing Quaker community. The Brown family was well established in Rhode Island by this time. This new location allowed the couple to settle and start a family, which they did with the birth of their daughter, Abigail, in 1715.

For Tabitha's mother, however, the bigamy charge proved nearly as damaging, if not more so, as it had for Tabitha. No longer was she a leading Quaker woman on Nantucket. The prestige that went with being a founding member of the meeting, and one of the leaders of the women's meeting, was lost. Anna Trott "chose to express her shame by ceasing to 'sit head' at Meeting," which meant she would not be a leader of the women's monthly business meetings or worship meetings.<sup>245</sup>

This scandal brought public reproach to one of the most prominent female founders of the Nantucket meeting. Among the nine members of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, who had "signed the petition for the Establishment of a Monthly Meeting on this Island, to the Quarterly Meeting on Rhode Island," with meetings that took place at the home of Nathaniel Starbuck, were four women, including Anna Trott.<sup>246</sup> She quickly became a leading female Quaker on the island and a respected member of the Nantucket Monthly Meeting, as had the other three original female signers. What is notable about Anna Trott is that much is known of her,<sup>247</sup> but not as much is known of her husband

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<sup>245</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 53.

<sup>246</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends' Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 4.

<sup>247</sup> Anna Trott has left a richer legacy than John Trott did. Her influential role in the establishment of the Nantucket Meeting and the position of leadership she held in the Women's Monthly Meeting on the island attest to her legacy. This is not a new trend in the first decade of the eighteenth century, but rather a continuation of the role women played in the early years of the Society of Friends. Many of the traveling ministers of the first fifty years of Quakerism were women, as Margaret Hope Bacon addresses in *Mothers of Feminism*, as well as Rebecca Larson in *Daughters of Light*.

John, other than that he died in 1719, fifteen years prior to her death. Anna was the member of the family with the prominent Nantucket background, being the woman who first “sat head” in the women’s meeting. She would join her contemporary, Mary Coffin Starbuck, as a leading voice in the early years of the women’s meeting. The public disgrace that came from Tabitha Trott’s bigamy case, however, would quiet the strength of that voice within the Quaker community.

More important than any one woman’s fall and shame, though, was the maintenance of morality within the community. In Tabitha Trott’s case, she was disowned, as she would not renounce her second marriage and return to the man who had abandoned her. Even in this instance, she had been dealt with according to Quaker procedure. When the meeting dealt with her, she had the opportunity to acknowledge what she had done.

The few scholarly references to this situation suggest the blame is Tabitha’s. Robert Leach argues in *Quaker Nantucket* that in each of the three disownments before the 1750s, there was significant and justifiable cause. He states that disownment only came in, “extreme cases that truly threatened families (in the case of Tabitha Trott and Shubael Coffin) or social concord (Stephen Hussey).”<sup>248</sup> Lisa Norling cites Leach when she states in *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* that, “(t)here were only three disownments altogether before the 1750s, all three handled by the men’s meeting and all three extreme cases involving repeat offenders whose conduct threatened their families’ well-being.”<sup>249</sup> The question worth exploring is whether Tabitha Trott’s conduct threatened her family’s well-being. She was abandoned by a schoolteacher who chose to leave behind his life on

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<sup>248</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 56.

<sup>249</sup> Norling, 62.

the island and his family to pursue the fortunes of privateering. For Tabitha to secure both a father figure for her children and the financial security of another husband seemed to be quite prudent and ethical, a choice made with the best interests of her family in mind. In this instance, it would appear the one female disownment prior to the 1750s may not have held up to this standard.

The meeting's disownment of Tabitha Trott, and the subsequent shame her mother felt regarding the affair, established the meeting's stance on issues that were perceived to threaten the family. Because this case took place so early in the monthly meeting's existence, the women's meeting was in the process of establishing itself as a public model for authority within the community. Mary Coffin Starbuck was an example of a woman who wielded tremendous power, but it would take time for her power to carry over to other female Friends on the island. Perhaps the most disheartening and surprising aspect of Tabitha Trott's plight was that she may not have faced it if she were a Puritan woman in Massachusetts.

The Puritans tended to free women in bad marriages. On January 2, 1676, Massachusetts mariner Robert Lisley married Elizabeth Thomas from Barbados. The couple's honeymoon would prove to be brief, as Captain William Wright had scheduled a voyage departing soon thereafter that would take the groom up and down the coastline of North America. A departure so shortly after the wedding would take Robert away from his new bride for months, at the very least. Elizabeth Lisley awaited her husband's return in Boston. She knew that Wright had scheduled for the ship to stop in Boston during its travels.<sup>250</sup> What Elizabeth did not know was that as she waited in Boston, Wright's ship had been blown off-course. Nevis was not a scheduled destination, as Wright had planned

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<sup>250</sup> Massachusetts Archives. Vol. 9, Petition of Elizabeth Lisley, 1679.

to dock the vessel in Jamaica and a few other ports in the Caribbean. But the ship docked in Nevis after the storm had hit. While in Nevis, Robert Lisley decided to explore the island and its inhabitants. There, he met Sarah Franc, a widowed young woman to whom he quickly grew attached. The couple married on January 15, 1679, although he had been married to Elizabeth Thomas for three years and was still legally married to her.<sup>251</sup> The court records proclaimed “to whom it may concern that Robert Lisley” and Sarah Franc “Widow were married together” according to the “constitutions of the Church of England and the Book of Common Prayer.”<sup>252</sup> The couple was legally and publicly married, in the eyes of the church and the state. There was, of course, no way Elizabeth could have known about her husband’s second marriage as she waited in Boston.<sup>253</sup> A private letter Robert Lisley had written his new bride in 1676 became quite public after Elizabeth petitioned for divorce. Robert addressed the letter to his “Dear Loving wife.”<sup>254</sup> From the tone of the introduction, he offered no indication that he had married another woman while he was still wed to her.

In 1679, after learning of this second marriage, Elizabeth Lisley filed for divorce in the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.<sup>255</sup> Several acquaintances of the couple offered depositions proving Elizabeth’s claims of bigamy, testifying that on separate occasions, Robert Lisley had either introduced or claimed that both women were, at different times, his wife. The testimony of his bigamy gave him little legal ground on

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.



which to stand. The ship's captain, William Wright, recalled Robert Lisley introducing Elizabeth as his wife. This was shortly before the ship departed on its voyage.<sup>256</sup> As Robert Lisley told Wright, "yes I am married and I will never deny it whilst I live."<sup>257</sup> For Robert Lisley to introduce Elizabeth as his wife in such strong terms to the captain of the ship he was sailing on indicates how strongly he felt for his new bride right after the nuptials. There was little doubt immediately after their wedding who Robert Lisley considered his wife.

Ann Barrett, a childhood friend of Elizabeth Thomas, had attended a party hosted by Captain Wright. At that party, she testified that she had asked Robert Lisley who his wife was. As he had to his captain, he responded that he was married to the former Elizabeth Thomas of Barbados.<sup>258</sup> The testimony found in these two depositions made it clear that not only was Elizabeth Thomas married to Robert Lisley but that he publicly declared her as his wife. He seemed to have no issue with letting others know that he had wed the young woman from Barbados. The most damaging testimony to Robert Lisley's defense was from Mathew Soley. Soley's deposition made two important claims. The first was that "the Common Report generally was that Robert Lisley was maryed to Sarah Franc" of Nevis.<sup>259</sup> That the "Common Report" records this suggests that Robert Lisley had made little effort to keep his second marriage secret, even if he had no intention of telling his first wife. Soley also testified that Robert Lisley had said to him that Sarah Franc was his wife.

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

Having depositions that pointed to Robert Lisley claiming two different women to be his wife at different times placed Elizabeth Lisley's case on solid legal ground in Massachusetts. It was clear in the eyes of the court that Robert Lisley had married Elizabeth Thomas of Barbados, and a few years later had wed Sarah Franc of Nevis. In the face of such overwhelming evidence, the Court of Assistance granted Elizabeth Lisley's petition for divorce and declared her free "from her marriage covenant made with the said Robert Lisley" on the grounds that Robert Lisley had strayed "from his marriage covenant."<sup>260</sup> Robert Lisley was not the only man brought before the civil courts for divorce on the charge of bigamy or polygamy, though, particularly in the maritime communities of New England. Elizabeth Stevens, for example, successfully sued for divorce in 1680 after she was able to prove that her husband "had three other wives already, one each in Boston, Barbadoes, and a town in England not specified."<sup>261</sup>

This 1679 divorce was far from being the first filed in the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. In *Putting Asunder*, Roderick Phillips cites instances from as early as 1639.<sup>262</sup> Beginning in the 1650s, though, there was a significant spike in the number of divorce petitions filed in the Supreme Judicial Court, though most petitions did not lead to a full, official divorce. Most of the petitioners for divorce in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century were women. Some had filed based on charges of bigamy against their husbands. Others filed for divorce on the grounds that their husbands were abusive. Still others sought the right to remarry after husbands had abandoned them or were lost at

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93.

<sup>262</sup> Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 246.

sea. For this latter group of women, the petition for divorce sometimes carried along with it a plea that the woman, whether widowed or abandoned, could not care for herself if she did not remarry. The availability of divorce in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Puritan Massachusetts offered opportunities for women in troubled marriages. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet William Carlos Williams' lines about divorce in Book 1 of *Paterson* may be as applicable to New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a recourse to troubled marriages as they were to his contemporaries:

Divorce is  
the sign of knowledge in our time,  
divorce! divorce!<sup>263</sup>

Marriage and religiosity were uniquely connected on Quaker Nantucket, in contrast to the civil nature of marriage on the Puritan mainland. Since marriage was the culmination of Christian love, and the embodiment of the Inner Light guiding two people into a partnership for the purpose of creating a family founded on Quaker Truth, the ties between marriage and religion were much stronger on Quaker Nantucket than in Puritan Massachusetts. The increased religiosity of marriage in Quaker communities including Nantucket made divorce not only the dissolution of a legal bond, but also a rejection of the Truth that compelled a couple to wed in the first place. Friends' faith in the sanctity of marriage meant that for women on Nantucket, their role in overseeing this sacred institution provided them with tremendous power and responsibility, but also placed on their shoulders a heavy public and intellectual burden. That burden created tension at times, as failing marriages and stringent Quaker regulations caused some to rebel against the authority of the women's meeting. But as much of a public burden as regulating

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<sup>263</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions Books, 1992), 17.

marriage was, it crafted Nantucket's Quaker women into a class of reformers for the next century.

This role civil law played in Puritan divorces during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries serves as an important contrast to Quaker marital regulations. By exploring both the legal statutes set and the way those statutes were enforced, it is evident from the contrasting regulations that women had greater protection under the Puritan definitions of marriage than women who lived under Quaker authority on Nantucket and in other parts of New England did. As sexually repressive as both history and popular culture have portrayed the Puritan community of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Puritans in Massachusetts and elsewhere in New England provided women with legal options not often afforded to Quaker women. Divorce law in Puritan Massachusetts also deviated from English divorce law, which was predominantly tied to canon law.<sup>264</sup> These options strongly hinged on Puritan law viewing marriage as a secular act. By using court cases from the late seventeenth century in Massachusetts, women who:

1. were the subject to fornicating or bigamist husbands
2. had husbands who abused them, or
3. were deserted either by husbands wishing to leave their wives or had been lost during military or maritime service

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<sup>264</sup> Nancy F. Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 33, 4 (Oct. 1976): 588. Cott argues that the new-found civil authority Puritans had in Massachusetts led to differences in both procedure and interpretation of divorce cases. Procedurally, divorce cases in Massachusetts fell under the jurisdiction of the Governor and the Council. Since in England the ecclesiastical courts had the authority to oversee divorce cases, Puritan Massachusetts further separated legally from the mother country. When the ecclesiastical courts judged in divorce cases, not only would they account for civil law but they would also interpret canon law in their decisions. This gave the English divorce courts a stronger tie to religion. Cott makes a similar case in Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (2000), 13. Her work spans marriage through the history of the United States, but does explore the colonial legal system that preceded the nation. She cites Massachusetts colonial governor John Winthrop as suggesting the ties of marriage to government bound women to abide by their choices in husbands. Winthrop's argument is that the woman acted freely, and must be bound to the ramifications of her actions, even to the point of becoming "subject" to her husband.

had legal options available to them in Massachusetts because of the more open and secular nature of divorce in the Puritan colony.

According to a statement by several Cambridge ministers, which derived marital laws from ecclesiastical tradition, divorce was “justly to be Pursued and Obtained” in nine instances. These included:

III. In case any married person be found already bound in a marriage to another yet living, a divorce is to be granted unto the aggrieved party.

VII. In case of a *malicious desertion* by a married person, who is obliged and invited to return, a divorce may be granted by lawful authority unto the forsaken. For the word of God is plain, “that a Christian is not bound in such cases” by the marriage unto one which has thus wilfully violated this covenant; and tho’ our Savior forbids “a man putting away his wife, except it be for fornication,” yet he forbids not rulers to rescue an innocent person from the enthralling disadvantages of another that shall sinfully go away.

VIII. As for married persons long absent from each other, and not heard of by each other, the government may state what *length of time* in this case, may give such a presumption of *death* in the person abroad, as may reckon a second marriage free from scandal.<sup>265</sup>

This set forth the granting of divorce for bigamy and desertion, whether by abandonment or by a death for which the deceased was not accounted. Fornication in the form of extra-marital, as opposed to premarital, sex and incestuous marriage also could lead to divorce. Three specific grounds for divorce according to the ministers were adultery, desertion, and absence for a length of time to be determined by the civil government.<sup>266</sup> John Milton even made the argument for divorce on the grounds of spousal incompatibility, since

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<sup>265</sup> Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), 34.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

joyous harmony was a primary goal of matrimony.<sup>267</sup> The matter of duration of abandonment before a spouse, almost always a wife, could presume their partner dead was left open and undecided by the Cambridge ministers. This was most often the wife because it was the husband who had the opportunity or misfortune as the case may be, of leaving communities for long periods at a time. Husbands in seafaring communities could be gone from home for years at a time crossing the seas, or they could be tragically lost at sea. In Puritan communities, men also could take up arms in wars against various indigenous groups or foreign enemies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This gave way to war widows and women who lost their husbands at sea. In these marriages, the husband fully intended to return after attending to his duties, but never had the opportunity to do so.<sup>268</sup>

The standard legal duration of time for declaring a missing spouse dead was seven years, a stipulation that was particularly important to maritime communities where men could be frequently lost at sea. “Divorces granted for seven years’ providential absence were based on the assumption that anyone absent for seven years could be ‘counted as legally dead to the other party,’”<sup>269</sup> according to the Connecticut Records. In a 1732 document outlining the status of married women, or *feme covert*s, English law gives seven years without contact from husbands as the allotted time for wives to seek divorce. “If either a Husband or Wife, shall be beyond the Seas, or be absent in England, the space of Seven Years, and the one of them not know whether the other is living within that

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<sup>267</sup> Frost, 182.

<sup>268</sup> Phillips, 253.

<sup>269</sup> Morgan, 37.

Time, it is not a Felony to marry again.”<sup>270</sup> This provided women who had either been abandoned or had unknowingly lost their husbands to the sea or in battle the chance to marry again, while giving husbands more than sufficient time to arrive home if they were alive and still had the desire to return.

The seven years provision did go through a period of revision. In 1698, Massachusetts passed a law that stated mariners who have “not been or shall be heard of within the space of Three full Years” on voyages “where the Passage is usually made in three months time,” the spouse left behind could “be esteemed single and unmarried” and could “lawfully marry again.”<sup>271</sup> For these three-month voyages, presumption of death after three years gave wives the chance to remarry earlier, offering four more years of marital financial stability the woman would not have under the seven years provision. It gave security to those women whose husbands were lost on shorter voyages. Roderick Phillips argues this was a response to the Cambridge ministers, who had called for a stipulation allowing women to marry even if they could not prove their widowhood.<sup>272</sup> Scaling back the necessary waiting period from seven to three years further supports the claim that Puritan marital legislation was more lenient than that found in Quaker marital regulations. In Phillips’ investigation of the plight of soldiers missing in action or mariners lost at sea, he feels laws passed that legalized remarriage after seven years “probably represented the earliest” that a wife could remarry, at least before the 1698 Massachusetts stipulation of three years. The courts felt that “the dissolution of the

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<sup>270</sup> *A Treatise of Feme Coverts: or the Lady’s Law Containing all the Laws and Statutes relating to Women, under Several Heads* (England, 1732), 46-47.

<sup>271</sup> Phillips, 138.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

marriage by death was assumed.”<sup>273</sup> This law was designed to help wives, specifically, in two ways. Should the husband actually have perished while overseas or during military service, and word had not gotten back to her, she would be able to move on and remarry. However, should the husband have abandoned his wife, she would not be prevented from remarrying. The threat of a charge against her of bigamy if her deserter husband returned would be eliminated. His desertion would not for the rest of her life hinder her ability to remarry.<sup>274</sup>

No such provision protected Friends, female or male. The Tabitha Trott case shows how under even the most trying circumstances, such as with a spouse leaving his family and a respected position within the community such as a schoolteacher to become a privateer, without proof of death, a spouse could not remarry. Uncertainty over a spouse’s status meant remarriage came with serious and significant risks. J. William Frost indicates how the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting took the same hard line on remarriage as had Nantucket. “Desertion and separation were not grounds for remarriage.”<sup>275</sup> The two cases he cites as evidence of this are both of men whose wives had been missing for lengthy periods. The first man, Thomas Marle, asked the meeting for permission to remarry in 1687 after his wife’s eight-year absence. His request was denied by the

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 298-299.

<sup>274</sup> Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, 38, 62. For those husbands who deliberately deserted from home, abandoning their wives, those women also had the recourse of divorce. Nancy Cott postulates that because the way in which these marriages ended was one-sided, “law-abiding wives wanted to extricate themselves from their status as *feme covert*s in order to act independently economically and perhaps to remarry.” For these abandoned women to have any rights as women in their communities, they had to shed the bonds of marriage. *Feme covert*s had no rights as individuals if they remained married. Those women had the misfortune of being *feme covert*s, without legal rights or an identity of their own, but also without sharing in the financial benefits of marriage. The sooner these women could either be independent of their obsolete marriages or in another marriage, the better their situation within the community. Marylynn Salmon suggests that, “requests for separations usually came from abused or abandoned wives who sought both protection in living alone and alimony.”

<sup>275</sup> Frost, 182.



meeting in the absence of proof of her death.<sup>276</sup> A second male Friend was disowned by the meeting in Philadelphia in 1748 on the grounds of adultery, after his defense of the absence of his wife for a period of seven years fell on deaf ears.<sup>277</sup> Regardless of location and whether Friends were a political and religious majority, Quaker meetings showed little flexibility in remarriage for Friends who could not prove that they had been widowed. In essence, just as there is no crying in baseball, there was no divorce in “liberal” Quakerism.

Marylynn Salmon makes the case that a tradition had developed that carried over into the late eighteenth century, affecting how some states established their marriage laws. She argues that, “states with historical ties to radical Protestant religious movements developed the most liberal attitudes toward divorce.”<sup>278</sup> Since radical Protestants had founded Massachusetts and Connecticut, for example, in the early seventeenth century, those colonies developed traditions about divorce that carried over to their state constitutions drafted during the revolutionary era. Edmund Morgan argues that until 1753, the right to remarry was difficult to obtain from the courts in Puritan New England. In *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, Morgan states that courts would grant separations and annulments on several grounds, but receiving the right to remarry was much more difficult. Morgan draws a strong link between religion and the laws, a link similar to that used by Nancy Cott a half-century later. Morgan’s belief is that the courts were “following what they

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Salmon, 78.

believed to be the laws of God.”<sup>279</sup> Pennsylvania also legally permitted divorce from 1682 to the beginning of the eighteenth century in cases of adultery.<sup>280</sup> When one partner could successfully prove the other had committed adultery, the aggrieved spouse had the legal right to remarry. This right of divorce and remarriage did not last long, as the Crown revoked the right of spouses to remarry.<sup>281</sup> Instead, divorce could only be sought *a mensa et thoro*. *A mensa et thoro*, which roughly translates to bed and board, allowed for a couple to separate and no longer share a home, but prevented remarriage.<sup>282</sup>

Friends’ views of marriage as a religious institution, in contrast to the secular interpretation of marriage in Puritan law, guided Quaker regulations on divorce. Since marriages were the culmination of Truth bringing two people together for the holy purpose of establishing a family rooted in that same Truth, divorce would be a rejection of what Quakers saw as a divinely sanctioned — and even a divinely inspired — union. This is not to say that Quakers were immune from civil law. That was not the case, and Quakers who violated civil law still could face the punishment of the courts. The meeting established standards of morality that extended beyond Massachusetts law, though. Divorce was a standard that was more stringent for Quakers. The meeting made every attempt at maintaining the insular nature of the meeting, ensuring that Friends judged the actions of their co-religionists. Friends would not be subject to the authority of Puritan courts if matters were handled internally. This was a lesson learned from the treatment of

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<sup>279</sup> Morgan, 34.

<sup>280</sup> Frost, 182.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Salmon, 61.

early Friends in England and in Massachusetts into the 1660s, where many were imprisoned in courts, or executed, where their own rules held no authority.

J. William Frost's *The Quaker Family in Colonial America* addresses how meetings dealt with troubled marriages. He illustrates how Quaker meetings sought harmony above all else, and the lengths to which meetings would go to ensure the preservation of that harmony. Among his case studies are the actions of the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, which "spent nearly four years trying to persuade Thomas Fitzwater and his wife to dwell together," and the Core Sound Meeting in North Carolina, which made efforts to first reconcile an estranged couple, then later attempted to force a loveless cohabitation.<sup>283</sup> Divorce was unheard of, and separation by choice of both partners was rare. In many instances, abandonment was the only way out for one partner in a troubled marriage, and there was no provision in meetings for remarriage. For several reasons, this was much easier for a husband than it was for a wife. First, husbands had greater economic opportunities, which allows for a personal financial independence women often did not have. Even when women took on a greater public role in the family finances while husbands were at sea, that did not suggest independence or mobility. Women who served as "deputy husbands" had an even more important need to stay at home to protect the family finances. Secondly, the geography of whaling aided husbands in abandoning marriages, while it hindered wives. Distance from the island, as well as the code of silence men to which men adhered when at sea, gave husbands more freedom to leave a marriage, while the guardianship nature of the women's meeting and the community on the island meant elder wives kept watch on younger ones, ensuring they remained true to

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<sup>283</sup> Frost, 181.

their marriage.<sup>284</sup> The women's meeting served an instructional role for the young and future wives of whalers. Third, the importance Quaker meetings, and the Nantucket meeting, placed on children and the family bound wives to their homes. In some cases, boys apprenticed on whaling ships with their fathers or other male relatives, but in families with girls and younger boys, the role of mother was of great importance. It trumped even the calling to travel and preach, and bound women to their homes. When men were either lost at sea or abandoned their families, familial responsibilities remained for women. This made remarriage necessity, particularly when the family had younger children.

The Nantucket Monthly Meeting's status as a surrogate governing structure for the island that superseded Massachusetts civil law was of monumental importance to divorce on the island. Not only was the family the foundation for education and economic stability on the island but it became the uniting force behind the meeting and the whaling industry. The importance of marriage within the Quaker meeting on Nantucket rendered divorce virtually nonexistent in the eighteenth century. To ensure the preservation of marriage and the family on the island, the meeting took significant steps to heal troubled marriages. This included family visitations to find common ground and visitations from the meeting to address more serious issues. The visitors of the meeting provided essential counseling for faltering marriages. By serving in this role, the meeting and its visitors

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<sup>284</sup> Philbrick, 172-174. In the south Pacific, diaries cite the lascivious behavior of Nantucket's sons. Nathaniel Philbrick tells of rumors of Nantucket whalers' exploits being well known early in the nineteenth century. The journal of Moses Morrell, who served aboard the *Hero* in the 1820s, offers a vivid account of Nantucket men being welcomed by native women as they approached the islands now known as Hawai'i. Morrell's journal, which he later requested be destroyed, told of the more sordid sexual exploits of Nantucket's Quaker men after months at sea. Morrell's request for discretion regarding his journal, and the scarcity of other tales of sexual dalliances by Nantucket whalers, is strong evidence of a code of silence regarding how men acted at sea. The islands still held enough appeal to lead some whalers to establish a new life in this tropical paradise. The careful observance of these men to protect their fellow whalers' reputations may have even led to the fabrication of stories of men being lost at sea.

created a culture of education and socialization regarding marriage and the family. This culture of education was coercive in nature, both teaching through guidance from the meeting's leadership and through the pressures of abiding by the dictates of the meeting. Those appointed by the women's meeting to treat with wives in difficult marriages would provide guidance for them, educating or even coercing them into how to not only save a marriage, but also how to protect the family structure from future disharmony. The visitations themselves were kept off record, though the appointments of visitors by the women's meeting were recorded. Visitations would ultimately establish the women's meeting as a provider of counseling and an educational resource for women who were expected to live under the sometimes rigid marriage discipline of Quaker Nantucket.

What is it about Quakerism that led to its complete religious control over the institution of marriage and the omission of a mechanism for divorce? Throughout much of the Quaker world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a desire to redirect control from the civil authority toward the meetinghouse. On Nantucket, though, this was more realistic than in most other Quaker communities because of geography. As such, Nantucket was not unique compared to other Quaker meetings based on any one set of criteria, but had a combination of factors that led to its reliance on the private over the public, and on the Quaker meeting over the town meeting. The meeting increasingly developed as more than a place of worship, along with the business matters practiced by all monthly meetings. The importance of Quakerism on the island made the religion a de facto civil authority in the early part of the eighteenth century.

Friends placed considerably more stringent limitations on the termination of a failed marriage, and took every step possible to preserve a failing marriage. This included

taking extra precautions to ensure a partnership was on solid ground even before a couple married. That was why the Quaker marital process was so extensive. The best way to prevent a marriage from failing was to see that marriage was not entered into lightly. The meeting performed its due diligence by investigating both partners, ensuring parental consent, and maintaining endogamous marriage. Even overseeing the wedding ceremony and signing a marriage certificate that was recorded in the minutes provided further oversight of marriage. Once a couple had married, it was not only their responsibility to establish a strong, healthy, harmonious family unit founded on Truth but the entire religious community had a stake in preserving marriage. Divorce would have been a failure of the marriage, but it could also serve as evidence of the failings of the community as a whole.

An example of the meeting intervening before marriage to address discord between potential spouses arose when Jedidah Folger brought a complaint before the meeting that her fiancé, Robert Gardner, had been too forward with her.<sup>285</sup> In 1729, Robert Gardner and Jedidah Folger had declared their intent to marry. Prior to marrying, Jedidah leveled charges against Robert of him being “too forward.”<sup>286</sup> Robert Leach and Peter Gow suggest in their book *Quaker Nantucket* that the charges were not as serious as Jedidah suggested, though the meeting took the matter seriously. This matter first came to light when the couple declared its intentions of marriage, and an investigation launched. The members investigating him reported that, “haveing taken care concerning Robert Gardners Clearness Etc. they do not find that hee’s altogether Clear there being a scandalous report of him — therefore this meeting do desire John Macy & Jethro Gardner

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<sup>285</sup> Robert Leach Papers, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 47, Vol. VI, 54.

<sup>286</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 54.

with Elihu Coleman to labor with him to Condem said scandal if true.”<sup>287</sup> Three prominent members of the men’s meeting met with Gardner, and he agreed to publicly acknowledge his transgression. After the committee was sent to investigate Jedidah’s complaint, the committee “reported that Robert Gardner has offered to condemn his course in a paper which was presented and read and recorded as usual.”<sup>288</sup> In that letter, Gardner stated:

Friends as my offence is made publick by the accusation of a young woman, tho not to that degree as shee has accused me yet I acknowledge my behaviour with her was so uncomely that I am now afraid I offended the Great God by it for which I have known a sorrowfull time & hope God will forgive me & blot out my transgressions & that you my friends whome I have offended would forgive & pass it by.<sup>289</sup>

That paper was accepted, and the couple went forth with their wedding in March of 1730. The ceremony had no disunity from any Friends from the Nantucket meeting, so reading a statement of confession satisfied both the meeting and Jedidah Folger.

For Jedidah Folger to make such charges against her fiancé shows that she felt confident in her ability to prove such a claim. She must have known that her credibility would not be seriously challenged. As the couple had not married, and with no procedure for Quaker divorce in place, this was the final opportunity to ensure the suitability of the pairing before it became irrevocable. In addition to her certainty in her own claims and credibility, Folger also must have truly believed that her fiancé had acted inappropriately, and the meeting would respond to these accusations accordingly. In bringing to light his

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<sup>287</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends’ Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 4, 61.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

transgressions, she was making a bold statement about the future of their marriage. She established that she had certain rights that would be guaranteed through the oversight of the meeting. Yet, having Robert Gardner's transgression recorded in the minutes of the meeting was enough for the meeting to retain him in good standing. It also was enough for Jedidah Folger to move ahead with the wedding. This indicates that Jedidah Folger felt some level of moral responsibility, and that her moral propriety had been compromised by his actions. Still, she placed her own morality in the hands of the Quaker meeting's regulations. When Robert Gardner made amends with the meeting, he also redeemed himself morally in her eyes. Cases like that of Jedidah Folger place women in the Nantucket Quaker community's moral epicenter. Women in this religious community were expected to maintain a proper moral order and piety.

Gardner's admission of guilt suggests there was still some tension between the couple regarding this matter. For him to suggest that the incident was not as serious as she had charged, even as he is publicly acknowledging his wrongdoing, shows there to be a continued disagreement over the incident. The meeting felt it was serious enough of a charge to have him make such an acknowledgment, but also accepted his downplay of the incident in his statement. Concerns over the incident did not appear to strongly linger with the couple, though, as they were married for twenty-seven years and had at least a dozen children. Nevertheless, Folger making such accusations about her fiancé to the meeting leadership before their wedding suggests she was not a consenting partner to what had transpired. The records of the Nantucket Monthly Meeting include many cases of mutual fornication, where both partners agreed to acknowledge their transgression to the meeting. This was not such a case. In this instance, Gardner's proposition prompted



Folger to report his forwardness to the meeting, that he might subordinate himself to its dictates, including the discipline of the women's meeting.

As with the marriage between Robert Gardner and Jedidah Folger, once a couple had married, the expectation of the meeting was that the marriage was for life. The Nantucket meeting minutes show no evidence of Quaker-sanctioned divorces in the eighteenth century, or even into the early nineteenth. In rare circumstances, some spouses whose marriages that had not been sanctioned by the meeting could marry again, if they acknowledged the error of their ways. This was most often the case for women who had married out of the meeting, and then returned to the meeting after their first marriage had ended. In some instances, the first marriage ended after the husband's death. The case of Ruth Bunker Myrick is an example of this.

On September 30, 1765, at the women's meeting, "a few lines were receiv'd from Ruth Meyrick by way of acknowledgment for going out from among Friends to marry which were read herein to satisfaction."<sup>290</sup> She had married her first husband, John Myrick, out of meeting, and came back to the meeting after he had died in 1761. At the next meeting, on October 28, Myrick declared her intention to marry Shubael Barnard. Patience Gardner and Theodate Gardner investigated, and were convinced that she was indeed clear to marry. Just as with those who joined the meeting and declared their intentions to marry immediately thereafter, it was important that she stood on ceremony and went through the act of renouncing her previous marriage for the benefit of the entire religious community. Ruth Myrick's speedy betrothal to Shubael Barnard suggests her renunciation was based in part on a desire to remarry. And the meeting's willingness to

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<sup>290</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends' Papers, 1672-1944*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 84.

accept that had the added benefit of increasing the community's numbers. Beyond the membership rolls of the meeting was a theological basis for Friends' stance on exogamy. Friends placed tremendous value on the family unit, and a wholly-Quaker home where Quaker children could be raised and educated in Truth was vital to the preservation of Truth. This also placed a tremendous amount of power in the hands of the women's meeting, as it decided how quickly the Quaker community could grow, and in what ways that growth would be balanced by a preservation of the family and holy marriage.

The case of Ruth Bunker Myrick shows the forgiving nature of the meeting to those in need. In 1761, she married her first husband, John Myrick, who was 21 at the time of the wedding. She was at least that age at the time of their wedding, and had been born into the meeting. Her parents, James Bunker and Bethiah Jenkins, married in the meeting in 1737. His parents, however, Isaac Myrick and Deborah Pinkham Myrick, were not Friends. There were no Meyricks or Myricks in the records as having married in the meeting by 1761. The only similar surname appearing in the marriages was a Mary Mirrick, who married Enoch Coleman in 1748. The Myrick family that produced John had come from Newbury, on the mainland. His father, Isaac, was a shipbuilder. The family had not joined the meeting when the couple married in 1761.<sup>291</sup> Because Ruth married outside of Friends, she faced the potential of being disowned at any point, though her decision suggests she felt the risk was worth it. The marriage would not last long, though. Later that year, John Myrick would suffer the fate of many Nantucket mariners and be lost at sea. The short-lived marriage did produce a child, though, a son named after his father.

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<sup>291</sup> The family history for John Myrick can be found in the catalogued Eliza Starbuck Barney Genealogical Record, available online from the Nantucket Historical Association, [www.nha.org](http://www.nha.org)

It was only in 1765, four years after her first husband died, that Ruth approached the meeting about returning to the fold, offering her acknowledgment of having married outside of Friends. By this time, she had met Shubael Barnard, and wished to marry him. He was a widower, his first wife Susanna Gardner — whom he married within the meeting in 1748 — having died in 1764, leaving him with four daughters and a son. In this case, she was a young widow, he a widower in his mid-thirties. Both had children from their first marriage, ranging in age from Shubael Barnard's eldest daughter, Eunice, who was fifteen, to Barnard's daughter Susanna and Myrick's son John Myrick, Jr., neither of whom had yet reached the age of five. To this new family of six would be added four more daughters and three sons, the youngest, Lydia Barnard, born in 1785 to a mother who was already 45 at the time.<sup>292</sup> By this time, all but one of the daughters from Shubael Barnard's first marriage, the youngest, Susanna, had died. Two of the youngest children produced by the second marriage took the names of deceased half-siblings. After Shubael Barnard, Jr., the son of Susanna Gardner, passed away in 1778, his father and step-mother named another son Shubael, born in 1780. Lydia Barnard, the youngest daughter, was also the second Lydia Barnard, named after Shubael Barnard's second daughter from his first marriage who had passed away in 1772. Despite the hardships both Ruth and Shubael had faced, including the deaths of their first spouses and several children, they both lived long lives. In 1822, Shubael Barnard died at the age of 92. The following year, Ruth Bunker Myrick Barnard died. As short as both of their first marriages had been, their second marriage lasted more than a half century.

Preserving the institution of marriage was a significant task undertaken by both the men's and the women's meetings. Due diligence alone in trying to ensure strong,

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

harmonious marriages was not always enough. A more proactive approach by the meeting was for visitors to meet with each family in the meeting, whether there were any concerns of disharmony or not. This was a practice that had carried over from Friends in the British Isles, and was common among meetings in the Delaware Valley as well as in New England. The meeting's visitors would spend time with each Quaker family, ensuring that the Friends who met with the visitors "were in compliance with Quaker directives on clothing, home decorations, and customs."<sup>293</sup> This visitation also afforded the meeting the opportunity to speak to the dictates of the meeting and epistles from the quarterly and yearly meetings and to more closely observe the family in a domestic setting. Even if there were no public indications of disharmony or of lingering issues for the family, if any such problems surfaced within the home, the meeting would be able to address those difficulties before they escalated. This could help preserve marriages that might otherwise have disintegrated.

The same year the Nantucket Monthly Meeting was established, 1708, the New England Yearly Meeting and Friends in London established procedures for family visitation. For Nantucket, this likely did not mean much change to the miniscule and close community of believers in the first few years of the meeting. Because of its size and intermarriage among families of Friends, there was frequent communication between members of the Society. As the size of the Quaker community increased, the need for more formalized family visitation similarly grew. These visits came when there were reports of disharmony as well as regular visits to ensure the upright behavior of families. As was the case in other monthly meetings, visitors reported on a number of findings in

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<sup>293</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Dublin's Merchant-Quaker: Anthony Sharp and the Community of Friends, 1643-1707* (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 217.

Friends' homes and lives. Visitors reported on various aspects of Friends' domestic lives, including the presence of items that could be considered in violation of discipline, like musical instruments, or the presence of slaves, or the financial difficulties of some households. Visitors were often instructed by their meetings to avoid "strictly personal affairs," advice that was sometimes not heeded, as J. William Frost recounts.<sup>294</sup> Family visitations could become more involved than merely ascertaining the piety of a household. Barry Levy cites the meeting's role in creating a family group therapy to address domestic disputes, a practice that was met with resistance as to its intrusiveness.<sup>295</sup> As much as visitors pried into the personal lives of Friends, they also offered new approaches to old problems. "Meeting intrusions were as creative as they were invasive."<sup>296</sup> This invasiveness could prove useful in both healing family wounds and in discovering ways in which the meeting can help its membership.

This act of Christian generosity did not ensure the piety of those helped out by the meeting. By 1765, Eunice Guinn, who previously had been the beneficiary of the meeting's charitable aid, had fallen out of favor with the women's meeting for marrying a non-Quaker. The women's meeting reported that, "Lydia Coleman & Lois Mary are appointed to treat with Eunice Guinn respecting her going contrary to the advice of Friends and make return in writing at our next monthly Meeting."<sup>297</sup> In the May 1766 women's meeting, she was set aside. What makes this setting aside so important, according to Lisa Norling in *Captain Ahab Had a Wife: New England Women and the*

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<sup>294</sup> Frost, 54.

<sup>295</sup> Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, 82.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 86.

*Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, is that it was the women's meeting showing autonomy in disowning Guinn, rather than passing the matter to the men's meeting.<sup>298</sup> "The Friends appointed to treat with Eunice Guinn now Eunice Wright make return to no Satisfaction and she having proceeded to marry the Man aforementioned it is the mind of this Meeting that she be set aside & no longer esteem'd a member of our Society until she make fr. Satisfaction respecting her past conduct."<sup>299</sup> The women's meeting was willing to go so far to provide support for women in need, but it would not violate its own regulations in the name of charitable support.

Even as relationships hit their lowest points, Friends took great care in guiding those marriages back on the right track. Visitations gave Friends the opportunity to address any problems within the home, such as with Robert Clasby in 1795. The visitors reported that Clasby had left his home in a "disruptable manner leaving his wife behind without proper invitation to go with him."<sup>300</sup> His wife, Eunice, faced the overseers of the women's meeting that same year, who reported that, "they have had Several opportunities with Eunice Clasby for Refusing to live with her Husband & don't find any Disposition in her to dwell with him any more." The women's meeting dispatched Anna Gardner, Elizabeth Rotch, and Dorcas Brown to meet further with her.<sup>301</sup> These visitors appointed by the women's meeting made every attempt at preserving this troubled marriage. Meanwhile, Robert Clasby had moved to a new home on the island, and met with visitors

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<sup>298</sup> Norling, 87-88.

<sup>299</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting Minutes, 1708-1787*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 10, 86.

<sup>300</sup> *Nantucket Monthly Meeting of Friends' Papers, 1664-1889*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 51, Book 5, 15.

<sup>301</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1787-1813*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 11, 97.

from the men's meeting, who similarly took every step possible to reconcile this marriage. The meeting could not find a way to repair this troubled marriage. Visitors from the men's meeting reported that Robert had "requested his wife to come and live with him desiring a reconciliation."<sup>302</sup> Eunice had no interest in this, however, as "she utterly refuses to do or to have any further connections with him as her husband."<sup>303</sup>

The Clasby case is an example of the meeting getting involved with a faltering marriage regardless of the age or reproductive potential of a couple. This was a second marriage for Robert and Eunice, as they had both been widowed. By 1795, Robert was already in his 60s and Eunice was a year from her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. The likelihood of the couple producing children was, to say the least, remote. Yet both the women's and men's meetings visited and counseled the couple for months in the hopes of bringing about reconciliation, reporting their findings back to the meeting. Over the course of the meeting minutes of 1795, there were meetings where the visitors were not prepared to report on the case. At the July women's meeting, Elizabeth Worth was added to the committee appointed to address the situation, which indicates the meeting felt it necessary to escalate its efforts in saving the marriage.<sup>304</sup> This is an example of family visitation increasing its reach into a more thorough form of family counseling. Yet even with these extraordinary steps, this marriage was beyond saving. Because the marriage was dissolving, both Robert and Eunice were disowned by the meeting, as the only other option would have been the meeting recognizing a divorce granted by the civil authority.

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<sup>302</sup> *Quaker Committee Book of Objections, 1713-1894*, Henry Barnard Worth Collection, 1641-1905, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 35, Book 9, 81-82.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> *Nantucket Women's Monthly Meeting, 1787-1813*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 11, 99.

This is evidence of how the meeting would make every effort to save a marriage, but it would rather disown a couple than provide the equivalent for divorce.

This involvement by the meeting is indicative of the role it played as family counselors, particularly with how the meeting addressed domestic disputes and offered advice to spouses in troubled marriages. Such counseling would often take place without significant official involvement by the meeting, aside from the appointing of a committee if the matter could not be resolved quickly. “Most disciplinary matters never reached the stage of formal meeting involvement.”<sup>305</sup> Visitors were expected to try to resolve any discord before it escalated to becoming a matter for the entire meeting, which is one reason meeting minutes do not have many cases of spousal disagreement recorded. There is no telling from the records how many minor or moderate disputes between spouses were resolved by the informal intervention of visitors, without ever appearing in the official minutes of the meeting. Friends did not keep official records of what transpired at these visitations. The only record is from the meeting’s minutes, which reflect who visited whom, and whether the transgressor satisfied the visitors by acknowledging wrongdoing, failed to satisfy the visitors by refusing acknowledgment, or if more visits by the same or other visitors was necessary. It is evident that the women’s meeting worked in tandem with the men’s in providing family and marriage counseling, though, a role that provided more experienced female Friends the opportunity of educating younger Quaker women in the expectations of the meeting and the community.

When counseling failed to heal a marriage, or if the transgressions were too severe, disownment from the meeting was often the only cause of action. Hepsabeth Allen Russell was disowned in 1776, “for her unbecoming treatment of her husband

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<sup>305</sup> Frost, 54.



Hezekiah.”<sup>306</sup> As was often the case in the meeting minutes, Friends hesitated at recording the more troubled details of such an issue, and instead kept the language vague. After the visitation of the meeting, Hezekiah was not disciplined for this incident, though both the men’s and women’s meetings concurred that she was to be disowned. Despite the disownment, the couple remained married, and had four children after the incident to match the four they had before it. This indicates that reconciliation did not absolve all parties of the discipline of the meeting. Even when a couple worked through any troubles, the meeting still felt entitled to administer discipline to one or both spouses if the offense was considered severe enough to merit it. The unbecoming treatment committed in this case was not specified, but it was serious enough to lead to her disownment.

In 1780, the meeting similarly disowned Rachel Worth for her “turbulent behaviour to her husband and in her family.”<sup>307</sup> As was the case with Hepsabeth Russell, this turbulent behavior is not detailed, but the speed with which she was disowned after this incident came before the meeting indicates how seriously the meeting took this offense. By 1780, the youngest child she had with her husband Silvanus Worth, Christina, was in her teens, and at 47 it was not tremendously likely the couple would produce any more children. Yet the meeting still viewed the behavior of Rachel toward her husband to be a threat to the sanctity of the family. The language of the disownment also indicates her behavior was not only directed toward him but toward other members of the family, as well. In this instance, like the Russell case, the women’s and men’s

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<sup>306</sup> *Henry Barnard Worth Collection, 1641-1905, “Quaker Committee,” Book of Objections*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 35, Book 9, 68.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

meetings were in accord with disowning the wife after counseling, and in both cases the marriages were saved despite the disownments.

The disownments of Hepsabeth Russell and Rachel Worth demonstrate an element of Quaker discipline at odds with the spirituality of Friends. Quaker practice in family visitation and counseling was to seek out middle ground between partners in a dispute. Visitors expected both sides to make some level of concessions to help facilitate reconciliation. Visitations “attempted to enforce compulsory household happiness through the free and open sharing of the emotional minutiae of household relations.”<sup>308</sup> Common ground could only be achieved through the sacrifice of both partners in an effort to restore harmony to the family unit. “If a serious dispute arose, Friends insisted on the subordination of the female.”<sup>309</sup>

Any perceived attack against the family unit was a serious charge in the eyes of the meeting, and was to be dealt with swiftly and, when necessary, severely. However, there is no way of telling how many cases of abuse, whether violent or sexual (or both), existed within Quaker homes on the island but went unpunished by the meeting. The meeting could only address issues that came before it publicly, whether discovered through family visitations or by one Friend making accusations against another. Abuse could be kept behind closed doors. Presuming such events did not happen at all in a Quaker community the size of that found on Nantucket may be somewhat naïve, even if the frequency of such abuse is impossible to truly quantify.

The role alcoholism played in abuse is also unknown. The meeting disciplined members for public drunkenness, though its frequency within the meeting minutes was

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<sup>308</sup> Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, 82.

<sup>309</sup> Frost, 183.

sporadic. An example of the meeting's discipline of drunkenness can be found in a minute from 1730. "It has been evident to this meeting that Nathaniel Paddack & Shubael Coffin have been excessive in takeing of strong lickqor to their own scandal & shame & the Great sorrow of the meeting."<sup>310</sup> Coffin would be disowned the next year for the same offense. Still, just as was the case with abuse, alcoholism did not appear in the meeting minutes with great frequency, particularly when compared to marital offenses.

For female Friends in abusive marriages, whether alcohol played a factor in that abuse or not, there was no option for divorce. In Puritan Massachusetts, divorce was available to wronged spouses as a means of terminating a failed marriage. Puritan belief in the civil nature of marriage in contrast to its religious status among Friends led to the codification of marriage in Massachusetts. Yet Friends held marriage to a higher standard because of the religiosity Friends placed on the institution. As civil courts in Massachusetts issued divorces and allowed for spouses to dissolve one marriage and begin another (at least when they were found to be the party not at fault), Friends took deliberate steps at preserving even the most troubled marriages. When difficulties arose within marriages, visitors from the meeting adopted the role of counselors to the family, providing support and education in an effort to preserve the partnership. In marriages where disputes lingered, J. William Frost asserts the meeting guided wives toward a more subservient position within the marriage, though this was not exclusively the case when the actions of the husband alone threatened the harmony of the family unit. The last resort from the meeting was not a Quaker-sanctioned divorce, but rather the disownment of at least one spouse. Female Friends offered guidance and education for women who sought

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<sup>310</sup> *Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 62.

it, but saw no place in the Quaker community for those who rejected that guidance and education. It was hardly a liberal community. This firm reliance on domestic education and the more public regulation of marriage by the meeting gave some Quaker women tremendous power over others, but it also came with a substantial intellectual responsibility to use that authority for the greater goal of preserving Quaker marriage on the island. The authoritarianism of Quaker marriage codes prepared women to rule in a society in which cultural dicta left no room for compromise.

## CHAPTER 7

### REFORMERS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Nantucket roots found in the women's rights movement of the nineteenth century are evident in the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, where Lucretia Mott and Martha Coffin Wright played pivotal roles in the proceedings. Similarly, the abolitionist movement had strong Nantucket ties. Anna Gardner was a leader in anti-slavery activism, and helped organize an anti-slavery convention on the island. Among the attendees and speakers of that convention was Frederick Douglass. Maria Mitchell broke barriers in the scientific world as one of only a few female astronomers of the nineteenth century, and even had a comet named after her. Like the others, she also was involved in social activism and the women's rights movement. Phebe Hanaford left the Society of Friends for Unitarianism, where she became a prominent preacher and advocate for women's rights, and — as Lisa Tetrault argues — a pioneer in the movement toward sexual equality. In each of these cases, the women who would lead this wave of nineteenth century activism descended from the Quaker meeting on Nantucket.

The unique public atmosphere of authority and education in the women's meeting, along with the economic independence necessary among women in this whaling community, provided guidance for future generations of women. That guidance forged a generation of women who would pave the way for the first significant population of politicized women in the United States. Margaret Hope Bacon argues in *Mothers of Feminism* that "Nantucket, with its isolation and frequent absence of husbands and fathers on whaling trips, became a training ground for the development of strong Quaker

women.”<sup>311</sup> This statement is true, but the roots of female activism that took hold on Nantucket grew deeper, into the public authority of the women’s meeting. Even those who spoke out against the authority of the women’s meeting offered a blueprint for future acts of rebellion against a patriarchal authority that was viewed as domineering. This culture, which centered around Quakerism on the island, placed Nantucket as fertile ground for female empowerment. Beyond the necessity of women to run the household economy because of male absence, the public authority found in the women’s meeting, and specifically in enforcing regulation to ensure a strong, holy Quaker family unit and thereby society, created a very public form of social and moral capital to be spent by future generations of women. It was the convergence of these several factors and the spending of that accumulated capital that set Nantucket apart and built the foundation on which so much of the nineteenth century abolitionist and women’s rights movements arose.

The first major argument presented in this dissertation is that the women’s meeting gave the island the organized foundation of strong public female leadership that directly led to the efforts of women with Nantucket roots during the nineteenth century. Even as the women’s meeting became far stricter in regulating its own members beginning around 1760 than it had previously been, it had already become a significant force on the island in educating female Friends on matters of morality. This proved influential for future generations of Quaker women on Nantucket. Those who sought to ascend the ranks of the women’s meeting gained an influence over the vast majority of women on the island. What is most notable about the presence of the Quaker women’s meeting as an authoritative body on Nantucket was just how public this female-led

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<sup>311</sup> Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 45-46.

institution was. Not only did more exalted members of the meeting hold power over other women, but that power was publicly present. The women's meeting disciplined its members openly in meeting, and recorded that discipline in the minutes of the meeting.

Yet rejection of the authority of the meeting by its female members was certainly an act of agency, of independence from the meeting, and such acts were in effect public. Anna Gardner knew this in 1775 when she chose disownment over succumbing to the will of the meeting. Mary Pinkham Clary had made the same choice one year prior, when she faced the discipline of the meeting for exogamy. But these instances are rare compared to the frequency with which women abided by the dictates of the women's meeting. More often than not, women willingly accepted the discipline of the meeting, often acknowledging personal shortcomings during public meetings, knowing that their acknowledgment would be recorded in the minutes of the meeting. This indicates how much influence the women's meeting held over Quaker women on Nantucket. Those who wished to empower themselves by gaining authority within the women's meeting often did so by acquiescing to the meeting's dictates — playing by the rules. Such a faithful adherence to the piety of the women's meeting maintained a sense of proper behavior among those women who did view the women's meeting with such reverence. Having such a strong and controlling influence on the island run by women combined with the increased role Nantucket women played in their families' finances to provide examples of female leadership seldom found in the English-speaking world in the eighteenth century. The complexity and delicacy of the various issues regulated by the women's meeting illustrates just how serious and important the women's meeting was in creating that influence.

Conversely, those women who did speak out against the women's meeting may have been damaging their status within the meeting and in the community, but they likewise provided an example of defiance to authority for future generations of Nantucket women to follow. The examples set by more openly rebellious women who rejected the authority of the meeting, and the legacy they created of female independence, constitute the second major, if interrelated, argument. Cases like those of Anna Gardner or Mary Clary refusing the meeting in such outspoken ways were rare, but they did reflect a period of change in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The women's meeting became more fervent in regulating female actions in the 1760s and 1770s, as Quakerism went through reforms that paralleled changes on the island as a whole. Increases in wealth and population on the island as the whaling empire grew along with the replacement of the original founders of the meeting with a new leadership led to a fundamental shift in the discipline of the meeting. Instances of public acknowledgments and disownments increased dramatically during this period. The meeting in general, and specifically the women's meeting, became far more severe in discipline, in part because of the power it wielded. The island was overwhelmingly Quaker, and those who were a part of the whaling fortune also belonged to the meeting, and in some instances comprised the leadership of it. So when this created a backlash during a period in British North America that was on the whole considered anti-authoritarian, some members stood up and spoke out against the power of the meeting. In doing so, these women provided evidence to the next generations of Nantucket women that not only could one assert herself by empowering herself and attaining positions of rank within the women's meeting but one could also assert herself by publicly demonstrating agency and rejecting



the will of the meeting, even at the cost of being disowned from the most powerful and influential religious institution on the island.

Another generally presumed, yet flawed, notion about Quakers in contrast to other Protestant denominations is that female Friends enjoyed greater rights and freedoms in all aspects of family and communal life than did their female Protestant counterparts. There is evidence that Quaker women enjoyed authority within the confines of the organization of their religious communities. This did not lead to greater freedoms outside of the confines of the meeting structure, however. The greater authority of the women's meeting over the lives of the female membership ensured a structure of public moral education, but it inhibited the behavior of those female members by placing such behavior under a strict set of moral guidelines. This is the third major argument of this dissertation. In efforts to maintain piety, the Nantucket Quaker meeting more severely limited women's actions in several ways. For one, the period of absence a woman had to wait before she could remarry was longer among Nantucket Quakers than in Massachusetts civil courts and Puritan communities. This was in part a result of longer whaling voyages for whaler men as the eighteenth century progressed, but it was still a regulation that was detrimental to a woman's ability to remarry and secure her financial future. Men also had greater opportunities for both extramarital sex and for marrying multiple wives in different locations than did women. Not only did men benefit from the advantage of geographical distance, a benefit that women on the island did not enjoy but an institutional code of silence existed among whaler husbands regarding their sexual infidelities, while wives who remained on Nantucket constantly kept watch over each

other's behavior. Women ultimately faced a higher moral standard on the island than either men or other women in other Protestant denominations endured.

Friends were also not necessarily more lenient in regards to marital transgressions and divorce on the whole. Regulations regarding incest limited potential spouses based on family relations more harshly than did Puritan and Anglican stipulations on the same matter. Fornication and bigamy found greater leniency in Puritan communities than they did in Quaker meetings. The Puritan notion of marriage as a civil contract, while Quakers viewed marriage with a holy reverence, created a dichotomy where Puritanism was more likely to both allow for and forgive marital irregularities than Quakerism was. Nantucket opens a window into that reality, as the Quaker meeting took harsher stances against those who it saw as challenging the sanctity of marriage than did Puritans. In this sense, Friends were more restrictive about matters of marriage and the family than Puritans and Anglicans were.

The fourth argument is that Nantucket provided many female role models in the eighteenth century in several avenues of life. From religious leaders, such as Mary Coffin Starbuck and future elders within the meeting, to mothers who ran household economies for their absent husbands, to political and social leaders, such as the outspoken Keziah Coffin, Nantucket offered generations of young women a host of strong, independent public role models from whom to learn. The many facets of Nantucket life in the eighteenth century had a strong culture of female leadership.

These four arguments are constant throughout this dissertation. Quaker women on Nantucket sought both empowerment and agency in an environment that did not always accommodate their best interests. In some instances, Quaker piety created obstacles that

prevented women from some of the opportunities men had. The institutional inequality that existed could not be officially quantified, but it did limit women's options, while granting men greater freedoms. The ideal of a pious, harmonious community placed limitations on marriage that were more severe than that of Puritans. Yet the strength of the women's meeting provided the foundation for Nantucket's nineteenth-century activism. That strength can be found in the women's meeting becoming an influential source of education and public guidance on an island where much of the men's leadership was out at sea at any particular time in the middle and late eighteenth century. It can be found in the women's meeting providing for its own, offering charity for those women who did not have the means of supporting themselves. It can be found in the women of the meeting assuming a greater financial role within the family than was found elsewhere in the English world. It can be found in the structure of community in the women's meeting providing for the female inhabitants of the island. It can be found in Quakerism, a faith that held both women and men equal under God (even if not every meeting or Friend did) becoming the dominant faith on Nantucket during the eighteenth century. And it can be found in the rejection of the dogmatic and stringent regulations of the meeting by some women so they could exert greater agency over their own lives. That strength provided the direction for what would become the leadership at Seneca Falls in 1848.

The Nantucket meeting issued an epistle in 1716 condemning slavery, and Elihu Coleman's tract in 1733 opposing slavery forged the abolitionism found in nineteenth century activism, including on Nantucket. The independent thought within a larger empowering communal cause in the nineteenth-century women's rights movement

paralleled the women's meeting of the eighteenth century. Nantucketer Anna Gardner's stewardship of the abolitionist movement on the island attests to this. The leadership provided by Lucretia Coffin Mott and Martha Coffin Wright to that cause, as well, embodied an aspect of the women's rights movement that existed in part because of the influential and formative role played by Nantucket Quakerism during the eighteenth century.

Although she was only eleven years of age when her family left Nantucket for Boston, Lucretia Mott held the island in esteem throughout her life. Her role as a Quaker teacher placed her in a position of furthering the culture of public authority and education she had learned on Nantucket. As both an abolitionist and an advocate for women's rights, Mott became involved in conferences, signed declarations, and made bold statements about her positions on moral issues of the nineteenth century, especially the abolition of slavery and women's rights. She cited both the women's meeting and the individual women who impacted the island as early influences on the woman she would become. "Raised with the communal memory of Mary Starbuck, and the daily observance of Anna Coffin's business acumen, at a young age Lucretia rejected the idea that women were spiritually or intellectually inferior to men."<sup>312</sup>

Anna Folger Coffin, Lucretia's mother, served the familiar role to whalers' husbands by acting as the primary keeper of the family's books in the absence of her husband, Thomas Coffin. Mott observed firsthand the vital importance to the family's economy whalers' wives served, and how this made Nantucket women stronger and more self-reliant by necessity. The advanced numeracy and literacy among Nantucket women (who not only kept their own minutes of their meetings and maintained the family's

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<sup>312</sup> Faulkner, 9.

account books but also were voracious writers of letters of correspondence) and the education passed down from one female generation to the next placed Nantucket's young women on relatively more equal footing, though not completely on level, with the island's young men. In a letter to fellow female activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mott even suggested the true power of the meeting rested with the women. "In the Mo. Mg. of Friends on that Island, the Women have long been regarded as the stronger part."<sup>313</sup> The education of young women by their female elders also had a perspective steeped in religiosity and morality. This influenced Lucretia in her involvement in the abolitionist movement, as it would other female abolitionist leaders with Nantucket roots, including her sister Martha Coffin Wright and anti-slavery leader Anna Gardner.

Martha Coffin Wright was born after the Coffin family moved to the mainland, yet the spirit of Nantucket lived in her as fervently as it did in her sister, almost fourteen years her senior. She was notably more radical than her sister in one regard. When Lucretia Coffin married Philadelphia Quaker activist James Mott (who was born on Long Island), she assumed his name and was publicly known as Lucretia Mott, having dropped her maiden name. For Martha Coffin, her first marriage ended with the death of her husband, Peter Pelham. His death left her a teenage mother and widow. After her second marriage to David Wright, she kept her maiden name as part of her full name, going by Martha Coffin Wright while older sister Lucretia Mott did not keep her Coffin surname as part of her name. This stance by the younger sister became increasingly common among women's rights activists into the middle of the nineteenth century, and unlike her

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<sup>313</sup> Lucretia Coffin Mott, "To Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Philada. 3 mo. 16<sup>th</sup>. 1855," in Palmer, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 234.

older sister, Martha decided to follow suit with that movement, though Lucretia never did.<sup>314</sup>

What these two sisters did have in common was an unwavering commitment to social activism, particularly in the women's rights and abolitionist campaigns. On post-revolutionary Nantucket, which had faced financial difficulties during the war, a spirit of anti-authoritarianism could be found among women and men alike. In *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Carol Faulkner notes that "Lucretia learned of whaling captains and female ministers who challenged the legitimacy of traditional religious and political powers."<sup>315</sup> When the Genesee Yearly Meeting in upstate New York voted to dismiss one of its most outspoken quarterly meetings, the Michigan Quarterly Meeting, in 1848 for desiring greater leniency in pursuing the causes of anti-slavery and women's rights, the decision forced Lucretia Mott and her sister into action. This is what led Mott to invite Elizabeth Cady Stanton to a meeting at the home of Jane Hunt, one of the Michigan Quarterly Meeting's leading advocates for abolition and female equality.<sup>316</sup> Martha Coffin Wright joined her sister at that meeting, as did Mary Ann McClintock. That small gathering planted the seed for the Seneca Falls Convention, at which Lucretia Mott was a leading voice. Mott's was even the first signature on the Declaration of Sentiments which emerged from that conference.

Lucretia Mott addressed Elizabeth Cady Stanton's questions about the strength of "Nantucket women" in their correspondence. In her 1855 letter to Stanton, Mott outlined the public strength of Nantucket's Quaker women of the eighteenth century. She cited the

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<sup>314</sup> Faulkner, 3.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>316</sup> Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 114.

prominence of the island's early Quaker leader, Mary Coffin Starbuck, noting that Starbuck "bore a prominent place, as a wise counsellor, & a remarkably strong mind."<sup>317</sup> Mott also pointed to eminent traveling ministers Hannah Barnard and Priscilla Hunt, both of whom gained renown for challenging established Quaker theology.<sup>318</sup> Barnard, who had married a great-grandson of Mary Coffin Starbuck, came under critique "for daring to express doubts of the Divine authority of the Jewish Wars."<sup>319</sup> She had also questioned accepted notions of Salvation as interpreted by the Society of Friends. "During the absence of their husbands, Nantucket women have been compelled to transact business, often going to Boston to procure supplies of goods."<sup>320</sup> Beyond the economic necessity of women to assume such an elevated role on the island, Mott drew from the education received by girls as an influence for future generations. "Then education & intellectual culture have been for years equal for girls & boys."<sup>321</sup> It is evident Mott believed the public role education and Quakerism served women on the island created a culture that directly led to the formation of reformers such as herself, her sister, and other nineteenth century women with Nantucket roots.

In this context, Mott and other female activists of the nineteenth century with Nantucket roots fit into the larger feminist identity emerging early in that century. Anne Boylan accounts for the shift that takes place in the early republic, where "the republican

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<sup>317</sup> Lucretia Coffin Mott, "To Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Philada. 3 mo. 16<sup>th</sup>. 1855," in Palmer, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 234.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 158. Lucretia Coffin Mott, "To Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Philada. 3 mo. 16<sup>th</sup>. 1855," in Palmer, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 234.

<sup>320</sup> Lucretia Coffin Mott, "To Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Philada. 3 mo. 16<sup>th</sup>. 1855," in Palmer, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 234.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

mother of the 1790s became the ‘true woman’ and Christian mother of the 1830s, as femininity and religiosity came to be closely associated.”<sup>322</sup> Female public association and organization drew as one of its roots the Quaker women’s meeting, which was a predecessor for female public authority. It also was an organization that was gender homogenous, with women making up the entire membership, from leaders to visitors to Friends with no positions of authority in the meeting’s hierarchy. This public organizational structure that came out of the Quaker women’s meeting allowed for the creation of new female-led — and often female-only — groups that supported causes considered to be of great moral importance, from providing for the relief of widows and other poor women, to increasing women’s political and financial rights, to abolishing slavery.

In 1716, the men’s monthly meeting read an epistle questioning “whether it is agreeable to Truth for friends to purchase Slaves & keep them term of liffe.” On this subject, the meeting agreed that it was the “sence & judgment of this meeting is that it’s not agreeable to Truth for friends to purchase Slaves & keep them Term of liffe.”<sup>323</sup> With the blessing of the monthly meeting, Elihu Coleman published a pamphlet entitled “A Testimony Against the Anti-Christian Practice of Making Slaves of Men,” in 1733.<sup>324</sup> This early commitment to abolishing slavery would lead to Nantucket’s Quaker community being heavily involved in the abolitionist movement in the early nineteenth

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<sup>322</sup> Anne Boylan, *The Origin of Women’s Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 16.

<sup>323</sup> *Nantucket Men’s Monthly Meeting, 1708-1772*, Nantucket Historical Association, Collection 52, Book 2, 16.

<sup>324</sup> Philbrick, 178.



century, with female Friends leading the way. Anna Gardner helped organize the anti-slavery movement on the island.

In 1822, Gardner's parents, Oliver Gardner and Hannah Macy helped an escaped slave, Arthur Cooper, and his pregnant wife evade slave catchers after having fled Virginia. Anna Gardner, all of six years old at the time, witnessed this particular act by her parents, harboring a runaway slave and his pregnant wife. The event left such an impression on her that she recounted it in her 1881 publication, *Harvest Gleanings in Prose and Verse*, which was edited and introduced by fellow Nantucket reformer Phebe Hanaford. "I recollect that I stood (I was then six years old) upon our back-stairs, when a man, black as midnight, with lips so paled with fright that they were as white as snow, came up the back steps, and stood in the doorway."<sup>325</sup> Hanaford outlined Gardner's tale, and how the entire family, and so many of those on the island, aided in the concealment of slaves such as Arthur Cooper. She told of Gardner's father and her uncle, Thomas Macy, who hid Cooper in a coat and Quaker-style hat to avoid detection. At such a formative age, this event would be one of the first of a long line of acts by Anna Gardner to strive toward abolition and racial equality.

Anna Gardner became involved in education at a young age, and took to teaching students of African descent. Among them was Eunice Ross, who in 1840 would be at the center of an event reminiscent of public school integration in the South in the middle of the twentieth century. When Nantucket's town meeting voted to deny Ross admission into its public high school, Gardner became involved in efforts to integrate the public school system on the island. Ross had studied at the African School on York Street, and had passed her entrance examination to attend Nantucket High School. Her rejection

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<sup>325</sup> Anna Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings in Prose and Verse* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881), 14-15.

from attending the public school came from members of the town, including some on the school committee and the select board, and galvanized the cause behind her. Those efforts were furthered by both white and black sympathizers to the efforts to integrate the schools. After a six-year battle involving not only Ross but another African girl, Phebe Boston, led by her father Absolom, the schools were integrated.<sup>326</sup> Both Ross and Boston began attending the school in 1846. Absolom Boston's prestige on the island may have aided in this effort, as he was a ship's captain, which was rare for a man of mixed African and Wampanoag descent (though he identified more strongly with his African heritage). Boston was often cited as the first African-American captain on the island.<sup>327</sup>

In 1841, at the age of twenty-five, Gardner called for an anti-slavery convention to be held on Nantucket. This gathering was at the Atheneum, the library on the island that was under the watchful eye of its first librarian, Maria Mitchell. *The Liberator* publisher William Lloyd Garrison was in attendance. At this conference, former slave Frederick Douglass addressed the crowd and gave a stirring account of his former life as a slave in one of his first public speaking engagements. His address impressed Garrison, and Douglass became a leading spokesperson for the cause. It was on Nantucket at this 1841 convention where Douglass' career as a spokesperson for abolitionist and African-American causes began. The next year brought another gathering, with Gardner once more assuming her role in the organizing of the event, along with contributions from other women on the island from prominent eighteenth-century Quaker families. Eliza Barney joined her husband Nathaniel in helping organize and preside over the

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<sup>326</sup> Philbrick, 184.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 177-178.

convention. This second convention, though, is known more for the chaos that would ensue than for launching the careers of esteemed speakers.

It was at this event that the “Brotherhood of Thieves” speech was given by preacher Stephen S. Foster, who would the next year publish a work reinforcing his strong beliefs about the evils of slavery and those who did not speak out against the institution. In this speech, Foster condemns most organized Christian denominations that had not taken a strong stance against slavery, particularly those denominations found in the slave-holding South. Violent reactions to the speech by those who did not share the fervent anti-slavery beliefs of Foster and other abolitionists led to a riot. Such talk may not have been so inflammatory when the island was religiously homogenous, predominantly Quaker. By 1830, though, with a population just over 7,000, “there were eight churches and five denominations.”<sup>328</sup> Congregationalists, Unitarians, Methodists, Baptists, even Episcopalians had established themselves on Nantucket. These groups, particularly Northern Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians with strong presences in Southern slave-holding states, were implicated in Foster’s speech. The violence over this issue was anything but consistent with Quaker pacifism. Despite traumatic events such as the Brotherhood of Thieves riot, Anna Gardner remained consistent to the cause throughout her life. She would dedicate herself in the post-abolitionist era to the education of freed African-Americans and their children, even relocating to North Carolina and later Virginia to continue that cause. She also became more involved in pursuing women’s rights, serving as an early advocate of female suffrage. Her dedication to these causes, even after leaving the island, indicates just how strongly her Nantucket

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<sup>328</sup> Byers, 298.

roots were, and that the education in social activism she had received in her youth would guide her until her death in 1881.

The arrival of abolition brought with it a greater emphasis on the cause of women. Nantucket's daughters had not abandoned their previous desire to achieve the vote, and became further motivated after slavery had been abolished. When Kansas was approaching a referendum on suffrage for both women and African-Americans, two fellow leaders in the movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, sought funding in support of women's suffrage. A wealthy Democrat and opponent of abolition, George Francis Train, offered to fund a publication for the women if it promoted white female suffrage, but opposed giving the vote to blacks. This led to the publication of *The Revolution*, which pushed for only white women receiving the vote. It created a schism between those who remained committed to both racial and gender equality and those who focused on women's rights at the expense of racial equality in the aftermath of the Civil War. Lucretia Mott wrote to her sister Martha Coffin Wright expressing her dismay at what she believed was a betrayal of the cause by Stanton and Anthony.<sup>329</sup> This division over race in the women's suffrage movement would become a major theme in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth.

Phebe Hanaford continued the tradition of outspokenness established by Nantucket Quaker women before her. She was born a Coffin in 1829, a cousin to Lucretia Mott and Martha Coffin Wright, and raised Quaker. She married a Baptist, and left the Society of Friends for that denomination, but would later be drawn to Universalism, where she became a minister. Her preaching mirrored her activism, as did her writing. She penned, *Lucretia, the Quakeress*, loosely based on her activist cousin, though with

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<sup>329</sup> Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 127.

the fictionalized account of the title character's courtship by a slave owner, a storyline she used to attack the institution of slavery. After the title character had rejected the slave owner's advances, he repents for the sin of owning slaves; the couple marries, and lives on the plantation with the paid labor force of former slaves, now happy wage-earning agricultural workers.<sup>330</sup> This fictionalized account held little basis in the life of Lucretia Mott, but it served as a popular tract for the atonement of those involved in the slave trade.

Hanaford's legacy is one of frequent controversy. Though never explicitly stated by Hanaford, Lisa Tetrault argues she spent her later years in a relationship with another woman. Hanaford had split from her husband, Joseph H. Hanaford, after having four children with him, though the couple never officially divorced. Lisa Tetrault believes that her split with her husband was tied to her relationship with Ellen Miles. Hanaford and Miles were together until Miles' 1914 death. Tetrault points to references made in newspapers and the scrutiny of Hanaford's Unitarian congregation in New Jersey as evidence of Hanaford's lesbian partnership with Miles, pointing to references made to Miles as the "minister's wife."<sup>331</sup> Despite the Society of Friends' history of female ministers dating back to the seventeenth century, Hanaford was among the earliest ordained Unitarian female ministers. Her likely lesbian relationship with Miles, which dated long before the modern sexual equality movement that most strongly emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, placed Hanaford at the forefront of multiple social movements. Heterosexual marriage was not a requirement among Nantucket

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<sup>330</sup> Faulkner, 214-215.

<sup>331</sup> After being awarded the Nantucket Historical Association's E. Geoffrey and Elizabeth Thayer Verney Fellowship in 2001, Lisa M. Tetrault wrote an article for the NHA, "A Paper Trail: Piecing Together the Life of Phebe Hanaford." <http://www.nha.org/history/hn/HNhanaford.htm>

Quakers, and female celibacy was accepted among Quakers in the eighteenth century on Nantucket, as evidenced by sisters Dorcas and Sarah Macy, who remained unmarried throughout their lives and remained respected members of the women's meeting.<sup>332</sup> Still, heterosexual marriage was far more common, and encouraged by the meeting as a means toward the loving family and holy marriage, and there is no evidence in the eighteenth-century records of the meeting of same-sex marriage. This places Hanaford as a pioneer in her openness of cohabitating with Ellen Miles, especially considering the relationship risked her position as a Unitarian minister. For Quakers, an intimate family life that was lively and filled with spiritual awareness was more important than Biblical rules regarding marriage. According to Tetrault, Hanaford's relationship with Miles was a leading cause of why her New Jersey congregation split.<sup>333</sup>

Hanaford was also the vice-president of the Association for the Advancement of Women, an organization founded in 1873.<sup>334</sup> The Association for the Advancement of Women was also founded in part by Maria Mitchell, yet another woman who was raised in the Nantucket Quaker tradition and who would join in nineteenth-century reform movements. The organization brought together women from diverse backgrounds, united in furthering the causes of women in the post-Civil War United States. In Mitchell's case, she had entered into the predominantly male field of the sciences, becoming an astronomer. Her fascination with the skies came from her father, who taught her from an early age how to use his telescope. His presence on the island, as opposed to so many

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<sup>332</sup> Eliza Starbuck Barney Genealogical Record, available online from the Nantucket Historical Association, [www.nha.org](http://www.nha.org)

<sup>333</sup> Tetrault, "A Paper Trail: Piecing Together the Life of Phebe Hanaford." <http://www.nha.org/history/hn/HNhanaford.htm>

<sup>334</sup> Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 134.

fathers whose whaling voyages kept them from home, allowed him to be more involved in the raising of his children, and ultimately shaped his daughter's curiosity about the skies. Once more, Nantucket's culture of teaching girls as well as boys created a culture of female education and scholarship.

As an adult, Mitchell worked as the librarian at the Atheneum, Nantucket's large public library, which offered her the opportunity to use telescopes and available books on astronomy housed at the library. She broke new ground on October 1, 1847, when she discovered a comet that would become known as "Miss Mitchell's Comet." As a result of this, she became the second woman credited with discovering a comet (the first being Caroline Herschel in Europe in 1788). Like Anna Gardner, Mitchell never married. Similarly, like Phebe Hanaford, she was born Quaker but after being disowned by the meeting, since her "mind was not settled on religious subjects," she converted to Unitarianism.<sup>335</sup> Her esteem in the astronomical community led to her appointment to the faculty at Vassar College and the position of Director of the observatory on campus. It was the combination of female activism and intellectual and scientific success that solidified Maria Mitchell's legacy on Nantucket.<sup>336</sup>

Maria Mitchell's position on Nantucket was another example of the private being public, of an island turned inside out rather than upside down. Through the women's meeting, females assumed leadership in the very public social order on the island. Girls grew up watching women make important decisions about other women in meeting, and responding publicly to those rulings. There was no expectation of Nantucket women confining themselves to the private sphere because there was no differentiation between

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<sup>335</sup> Leach, *Quaker Nantucket*, 173.

<sup>336</sup> Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, 156-158.

private and public. The authoritative structure of the meeting and the necessity of women entering into business during husbands' extended whaling absences deprived the island from having separate spheres.

Each of these women, and many others with Nantucket roots who made up the membership, if not the leadership, of various abolitionist and women's rights societies, served at the forefront of social and economic issues of the nineteenth century. In some instances, those issues still exist in the early twenty-first century. Phebe Hanaford's right to marry Ellen Miles, for example, is not protected in many parts of the United States and throughout the globe. The acceptance of her as an ordained minister, both as a female and as a lesbian, is similarly not universal among various religious institutions. Lucretia Mott's argument to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a male leader of the women's rights movement, addressed a matter that is still in debate in the United States early twenty-first century, that of pay equality for women. She wrote Higginson in 1854, lamenting the difference in pay between male and female public school principals in Philadelphia. "In our Model & Normal Public School in this City — the Male principal's salary was \$1,200 — the Female's \$500 — the latter performing a greater task — & giving great satisfaction."<sup>337</sup> Even Maria Mitchell's venture into the male-dominated scientific discipline of astronomy has not led to full gender balance in the fields of mathematics and science. These ongoing issues, still in debate a century and a half after being first challenged by these strong women with roots in the eighteenth century Nantucket Quaker women's meeting, demonstrate just how far ahead of societal change Nantucket women were in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>337</sup> Lucretia Coffin Mott, "To Thomas Wentworth Higginson: Philada. 4 mo. 6<sup>th</sup>. 54," in Palmer, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 231.



It is of ultimate importance to view the many changes that did come about as a result of the efforts of female reformers with ties to Nantucket Quakers, though. Freed slaves and abolitionists of African descent worked alongside Quaker abolitionists, including several women, in ultimately succeeding in ending slavery in the United States shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War. Those who pushed for increased political rights for women, including universal suffrage, succeeded with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Women have the right to serve as ordained ministers in more denominations now than they did in the nineteenth century, as well as having increased property rights, greater economic equality (as the wage gap is considerably smaller than that described by Mott in her letter to Higginson), and equal marriage rights, as the right for same-sex couples to marry has been codified, as of the beginning of 2015, in thirty-six states and seventeen countries. The number of women entering the fields of math and the sciences has also increased since Maria Mitchell helped shatter that glass ceiling. Change may come slowly in some ways, but it can only come from the efforts of reformers who are willing to fight for the social causes in which they believe.

The legacy of Nantucket female reformers in the nineteenth century runs deep. In so many cases, such as those illustrated above, one common tie was family association to Quakerism, even if the reformers themselves were no longer Friends. And there were other regions that produced abolitionist and women's rights activists in the nineteenth century, both Quaker and non-Quaker. Nantucket was set apart because of a combination of a strong female public authority within the women's meeting and a necessity for female ownership of the household income, consequences of lengthy male absences resulting from the whaling economy on the island. This created a breeding ground for

reform. As Jean Soderlund argues, the Delaware Valley had women's meetings that provided structure and authority, allowing women to ascend to higher ranks within their own religious community. The women's meetings in the Delaware Valley, however, did not fill a void that was left in the men's meeting, as merchant Philadelphia and the rural surrounding areas did not see the extended male absences as were seen on Nantucket. The Nantucket women's meeting provided both the foundation for organized authority run by women and a culture of educating future generations of Quaker women.

Nantucket had a tradition of outspoken women in the eighteenth century, such as Mary Coffin Starbuck and Kezia Coffin, a predisposition toward strong, independent women who were comfortable enough in the community to express their opinions freely. It had a powerful women's meeting that created a culture of public authority and education to be passed down from generation to generation. Women on the island also demonstrated a resistance to authority, as well, as seen in Anna Folger Gardner and other Quaker women who resisted the increasingly restrictive morality of the meeting beginning in the 1760s. Women often served as the financial head of the household, sometimes for years at a time, in place of absent, or even deceased, husbands. The combination of these factors in accumulating moral and social capital, capital that was built in creating a culture of female-dominated public authority and spent on affecting significant social change in the nineteenth century, established Nantucket as a prime breeding ground for the female reformers who would take that spirit of activism from the island to the mainland.

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