

# Quaker Records Offer a Wealth of Information

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Lisa Parry Arnold has a rich Quaker heritage. A tenth generation descendant of Quakers, Arnold was a birthright Friend of the same Westfield Friends Meeting in Cinnaminson, New Jersey, that her family had attended since 1816. She attended a Quaker boarding school and married at a Quaker meeting.

Her fourth great-grandfather, blacksmith Issac Potts, gave his home to George Washington to use as his Valley Forge headquarters because a more direct involvement in the Revolutionary War—the forging of bullets—would have violated his pacifist religious beliefs.

Alice Paul, her grandfather's first cousin, was a suffragist who wrote the original Equal Rights Amendment in 1923. That act was in line with the Quaker belief in the equality of all people.

Arnold, who has family members who are still practicing Quakers, converted to the LDS faith as an adult. She found, however, that her substantial Quaker heritage sparked her interest and research in the Society of Friends history and led to her involvement in a landmark genealogical project.

A recently retired Ancestry employee, Arnold was instrumental in the acquisition and digitizing of the massive collection of Quaker records in the United States and England. Approximately 80 percent of Quaker records, with 11 million names, are now searchable online at Ancestry.com, Arnold said. The Quakers' detailed records present a treasure trove of genealogical information. Previously, although they were well-preserved in college libraries, their limited availability required the researcher to travel.

Arnold, who often speaks about the Quakers at genealogy conferences, recently offered a course on the Quakers at the Conference on Family History and Genealogy at Brigham Young University. She has also written a guide to assist in Quaker genealogy research titled *Thee and Me: A Beginner's Guide to Early Quaker Records*. The book is available on Amazon.

In her lecture and book, Arnold explained the Quaker customs and beliefs that some researchers might find curious. An understanding of the Quakers' origins, beliefs, and customs is vital in gleaning pertinent information from Quaker records, she said.

Born in 1624, Quaker movement founder George Fox, the son of a weaver, lived at a time of social and political unrest in England. Arnold said that as a young man, he was appalled at the hypocrisy he saw in organized religion, calling himself a "troubled soul in search of rest." In his religious quest, he turned to the King James Bible. He said when he found his faith floundering, he heard a voice that said: "There is one, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition; and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy."

He stopped paying tithes to the Church of England and patterned his new religion on two basic concepts, Arnold said. First, only the Lord can offer redemption—it cannot come from any man. Second, all men and women can receive direct revelation for their personal lives. He believed in "spiritual conversion, not rituals, and believed there is God in every man," an inner light, she said.

Early Quakers were persecuted and punished in England, being sold into slavery, fined, or jailed. George Fox himself was jailed 24 times during his life, Arnold reported. While in jail, he wrote pamphlets to his followers, called the Children of Light. He later renamed them the Friends in Truth and then Religious Society of Friends.

The religious movement acquired the nickname "Quakers" when Fox, appearing before an English magistrate, told the judge that he only "quaked and trembled before God," Arnold said.

Fox continued writing and preaching throughout his life in the British Isles, Europe, and America. Despite the persecution, the Quakers eventually grew to 10 percent of the English population by the time Fox died, she said.

Among the common Quaker practices, terminology, and beliefs that Arnold discussed are:

**Meeting:** Quakers say "going to meeting" like another church-goer might say "going to church." The Quakers have a weekly worship service called the "meeting," and their building is called the "Meeting House." The religion's administrative structure also includes monthly business meetings for men and women and quarterly and yearly meetings that encompass a larger number of congregations.

The Quaker Meeting House is set up with benches facing the middle of the room. There is no pulpit, no paid clergy, no administration of the sacrament, no passing of a collection plate, no sermons, and no music. The Quakers worship in silence, "centering down" to meditate on the words of Christ.

A worshiper can stand to speak briefly if so moved, but that person takes upon himself or herself a great responsibility to "break the silence," she reported.

**Membership:** Membership rolls began in 1650. When a member moved from one meeting to another, the member received a Certificate of Removal. The Committee of Clearance in the new meeting would make certain that there were no problems with the membership. Arnold described the Friends' records as "awesome because you can trace a person from one meeting to another."

**1827 Split:** The Quakers split into two main groups, the Hicksites and Orthodox, in 1827, although there were smaller splinter groups. The more liberal Hicksites followed a New York Quaker, Elias Hicks, who believed in continued personal revelation, not just the teachings of the Bible. A smaller, more conservative group relied solely on the Bible and became known as the Orthodox Quakers. Researchers will find the groups kept separate records after 1827, Arnold emphasized.

**Weddings:** Researchers will discover their ancestors' names for three months in the meeting minutes when a couple plans to marry. The couple announce their intentions the first month. In the second month's recording, there will be the report of the Committee of Clearness, a group of men and women who met with the couple to ensure they understood the sanctity of marriage and are "cleared" of any commitments or reasons that would prevent the marriage. The report of the marriage is listed in the third-month minutes.

The bride and groom are not married by clergy but recite their vows to each other. The marriage certificate, which took the place of an official document, is signed by at least 12 witnesses, including the couple's parents, family members and others in attendance, who don't have to be Quakers. The list of these names will be found in the meeting minutes.

**Births:** Quakers do not have baptisms or christenings. Early Quaker records did not list births but might have the names of family members listed when they moved between meetings. Vital statistics were kept in separate record books after 1850.

**Deaths:** Meeting minutes discussed burials, not deaths. There was no funeral but a memorial service. It started as a silent service, and the silence was broken when individuals were invited to share remembrances of the individual. The service was a celebration of the person's life. Quakers did not wear black as a symbol of mourning. There usually was no eulogy, no casket, no viewing, and no wake.

**Burials:** Early Quaker burial grounds were simple fields with no stones. Later, the headstones were small, simple and uniform in size without any display of wealth.

**Plain language:** To avoid class distinction and stress the equality of all, Fox tried to reform language by using "thee," "thy" and "thou" in place of the pronoun "you." Meeting records use this "plain language."

**Pain dress:** Quakers were admonished to dress in a simple manner that didn't draw attention to themselves.

**Dates and Calendars:** Early Friends objected to the names of days and months because of their heathen origins. So, they changed days and the calendar to a numerical system, and it can be confusing. Sunday became First Day, Monday was Second Day, etc. The months followed a similar pattern. January was First Month, February the Second Month, etc. The researcher must be careful to determine if the Julian or Gregorian calendar was used. Before 1752, the first month was March, not January. March would be written as i or 1 mo. Arnold said researchers need to be careful to write the dates as listed and not try to correct to what they think might be correct.

**Discipline:** The yearly meetings would produce a *Book of Discipline*, and the disciplines were discussed and recorded in meetings. If a person expressed regret and wrote a letter of apology for an infraction, he could avoid discipline. Those who didn't faced disownment. Unlike other religions, disownment was not a shunning or an excommunication. It meant only that the Quaker couldn't vote in business meetings. Some offenses leading to disownment were: drinking to excess, habitual absence from meeting, marrying a first cousin, marrying without parental permission, marrying a non-Quaker, stealing or any type of lying or dishonesty, parenting an illegitimate child, committing adultery, or paying tithes to another church.

**Pacifism:** George Fox believed that his followers could not fulfill the mission of following in Christ's

footsteps if they supported violence and war efforts. Researchers might find that early Quaker ancestors paid double in taxes because they refused to fight, Arnold said.



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[Martha](#) says:

[November 18, 2016 at 1:50 pm](#)

This is very helpful. My Quaker ancestors are Deuel and Stockbridge families from NY and MA. .

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[Chris Armstrong](#) says:

[November 21, 2016 at 10:36 am](#)

Nice article, Angelyn! So interesting to learn about these practices.

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[CHRISTINE](#) says:

[August 7, 2019 at 5:34 am](#)

This is very helpful. My Quaker side is the Chase and Baumbaus side from CONNECTICUT and Ohio.

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