



Coldstream Meetinghouse - 1859

Newsletter

CANADIAN FRIENDS HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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Anne Morden, First Settler in the Dundas Valley

by

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The history of Upper Canadian Quakerism is incomplete without inclusion of those isolated Friends who left their mark on the first settlements. One such forgotten Friend is Anne Morden (1743-1832) of Dundas. Her story reminds us of the severe strain placed on Quakerism by the American Revolutionary war and the resulting ambiguities of political and religious loyalty. Circumstances such as Anne Morden's help explain how it was that Quaker belief had such a severe testing on the frontier and often did not survive to be transmitted down the generations.

The Morden family had lived continuously in the town of Dundas and on farms surrounding for at least eight generations, and the present Morden bakery in town is run by a direct descendant of this earliest settler who arrived with her children in 1787. Yet memory of her Quakerism is virtually extinguished for reasons we shall see, and no record remains of early Quaker meetings if any were held in Dundas by this or other such families.

Anne Morden was by official account a Loyalist, entitled to grants of land in recognition of losses brought about by action during the American war of independence. But like the 'loyalty' of many other Upper Canadian Quakers, hers was of a very special sort. Arthur Dorland explains what loyalty meant to Friends who under threat migrated from the colonies into the British territory that is now Canada:

Throughout the Revolution, the Society of Friends adopted, as far as possible, an attitude of strict neutrality; and ...while many Friends who came to Canada during the first Loyalist migration were really Loyalists at heart, so far as they had any political leanings at all, they



were never partisans, inasmuch as any member who became an active partisan in the struggle on either side was promptly disowned. The Quaker migration to Canada was not, therefore, a Loyalist movement, but it merged into a migration of Loyalist relatives, friends, and neighbours from the older American settlements to Upper Canada. Accordingly, while the names of many of the first little band of Friends who came to Upper Canada in 1784 are listed in the Crown Land Records as 'United Empire Loyalists', in reality they were not 'Loyalists' in the accepted sense of the word. For, though many suffered confiscation and loss of their property, it was because they refused to fight for the American cause and not because they fought for the British.¹

Ralph and Anne Morden found themselves pressed to the line of demarcation between what was acceptable to the neutral Society of Friends in wartime and what was not. It is doubtful whether she was ungenerously disowned for her husband's easily misunderstood activity as an alleged British spy. But two of her sons who took arms for the British in the 'Royal Yorkers' and another in the 'New Jersey Volunteers' no doubt lost their standing in the Society of Friends. This helps explain why early Dundas did not become a centre of Quaker settlement, though that was the only religion of the Mordens when they arrived as its first white inhabitants.

Anne Morden's story of tragedy and courage has several versions, the most accurate of which is given by T. Roy Woodhouse in Part I of The History of the Town of Dundas published by the Dundas Historical Society in 1965. From this source we may summarize the main facts. Anne Morden's family name was Durham, Quakers of New Jersey, and her husband Ralph adopted that religion upon marriage in 1765. His people had emigrated from Yorkshire and eventually took up residence near the town of Easton, Pennsylvania. There Ralph farmed and raised his family unimpeded until the fifth year of the revolutionary struggle, in 1780. As a Friend he had refused any military service, but a strange entanglement with an active Royalist claimed him as a war victim all the same. This was Robert Land, later one of the earliest settlers of what became Hamilton, Ontario, who at the time was a dispatch carrier for the British army. Land had been captured and released and was being watched as he resumed partisan activity in the vicinity of Easton. He apparently hired Ralph Morden to help get messages and dispatches past sentries to an Indian ladder that led up a cliff face to a safe route by which their destination might be reached. Ralph Morden, engaged because he knew the terrain, in his innocence did not suspect

the trap which had been laid for Land. He had, however, agreed to a ruse of hiding the messages in sacks of flour which they were carrying when apprehended. The revolutionaries shot Land and left him for dead, but he survived to escape to the British, while Ralph Morden was taken prisoner and held for trial as a spy. The charges against him of traitorously spying and of conspiring to start an Indian rebellion and massacre, of being "armed and arrayed in a hostile manner" were no doubt greatly exaggerated if not downright untrue. Seven witnesses appeared against him and only one for the defence, with Ralph Morden pleading his innocence by saying that he had acted on both sides in "mercy and kindness", never intending to do harm or be a belligerent. Unfortunately a pass from the British had been found on him which was taken to mark him guilty, however neutral he said he remained in his heart. Fair trials in the context of war are notoriously few. Ralph Morden was found guilty and condemned to die for treason. Though protesting his innocence to the end, he was hanged without mercy on November 25, 1780. An eye witness to this event who calls Ralph Morden 'very old' may be taken to imply that the cruel proceedings had reduced him to such an appearance.

It was then his sons threw over the peace testimony to take up arms for the British. They must have done so seething with the injustice done to a well meaning but no doubt imprudent father. There is no record to say whether or not they found revenge sweet, but they all survived hostilities to re-group at Fort Niagara in 1786. There they brought their mother and the younger children until, with Land's assistance, a safe place to settle could be found. This was to be in the upland of what came to be known as Coote's Paradise, once lovely marsh lands at the end of Burlington Bay just below the Dundas valley. (Now unhappily Coote's Paradise and its canal are a scummy slough, receiving the Dundas sewerage in quantities that make it an eyesore and a health hazard.) But in those days the area was indeed an untouched paradise, with the Niagara escarpment rising majestically behind this richly varied habitat of plant and animal life. On the dryer slopes at the Dundas side the Morden boys cut into bush to build a log house with enough area around it to grow some crops. The year 1788 was a poor one for farming but with the succeeding good season they managed to establish a self-sufficient homestead. The refugees were now residents in a new land.

At this time the Mordens were still squatters, hoping to be given legal rights in the territory they occupied. After the Township of West Flamborough was surveyed the Mordens entered petitions for Loyalist grants, and from 1793 by continued petitioning they amassed the following holdings:

Anne, lots 16 and 17, Con. 1, less 20 acres in Coote's Paradise (380 acres)

John, lot 18, Con. 1, and lot 26, Con. 2 (400 acres)
 David (son of Ralph's brother George) lot 14, Con. 1.
 Ralph, lot 15, Con. 1 (200 acres)
 Moses, lots 20 and 21, Con. 2 (400 acres)
 James, lot 27 and 28, Con. 2 (200 acres only)
 Anne also got lots 18 and 19, Con. 3, Barton
 Twp. (200 acres)²

The grand total of their holdings eventually came to 1780 acres in West Flamborough, 980 of it in the Dundas valley, together with some now lying in West Hamilton, much of it heavily urbanized. But 'Widow Morden', as she was known, could hardly have anticipated what was to come about. Looking from the window of her 14 by 16 foot log house on the York Road she would have seen only small evidences of the settlers 'roughing it' in the nearby bush. None of the newcomers seem to have been Friends, and only the most rudimentary community took shape in the era of mere survival. By 1800 there were only about forty five persons altogether in the Dundas Valley, all still scratching for an existence, with isolated family units seeming to be the rule. Means of meeting even the basic needs were scant and it was only by continued ingenuity that life was managed at all. There was not much to show for the hard labour expended. We hardly wonder then that restlessness drove some of the Morden family onward from their first settlement toward other prospects to the west.

John and his mother sold their holdings in 1808 and moved to London Township where both died about 1832. James and Ralph removed toward Lake Ontario in the vicinity of Burlington, while the family of Moses remained where they had settled on top of the escarpment in West Flamborough Township. The daughters dispersed by marriage are not so easily traced. Jonathan Morden, who was operating a mill on Flamborough Creek as early as 1803, and whose family remained to multiply, is not usually connected with Anne, but probably he was related in some way. There were enough of the name remaining to ensure its long continuation.

Of her Quaker beliefs Anne Morden's descendants can tell us nothing. Family tradition has it that Methodist circuit riders quickly gathered these settlers into their fold, as indeed happened to many other isolated Friends. Later these Methodist people were absorbed into the United Church where they remain to this day. Even the stronger Quaker communities felt the impact of Methodism, often as a welcome invigoration that later led to discontent and division within meetings and within families, not to say within persons themselves. Like the promised liberations of drugs and sex cults in our day, Methodist 'hell fire' camp revivals exploited latent psychological instabilities in the pioneer communities. The result was often deep unsettlement which individuals were simply unable to handle. Silent Quaker meetings, with their

open ministry, could not hope to counteract news of ecstatic conversions claimed as the work of God. With pioneer life as uncertain as it was, for many the appeal of extremist religion was beyond resisting.

From 1790, when the first Methodist meetings were held in the Niagara peninsula, the movement spread rapidly into every bush settlement. Circuit riders carried its powerful influence into the remotest places, much as George Fox and the first Quakers had done in England during the preceding century. As Playter writes, "considering the nakedness of the land, as to a gospel ministry, with the wish of the people, a door of Providence was thought to be opened."³ Much of the most vigorous religion on the frontier was therefore Methodist, always evangelical and sometimes, as we have said, of the wild revivalist sort. Consequently diversions and schisms sprang within the movement, and outposts of various factions were established. At this remove it is impossible to distinguish what all of these were, nor is it important. In 1839 we hear of the 'Chapel at the Twelve' with John Morden as assistant to the lay preacher.⁴ This gives evidence that the Mordens had been 'awakened', and it indicates why they never found their way back into the quieter Friends' fold.

But if they had wanted to return where would they have done so? Perhaps by joining the indulged meeting held in nearby Ancaster at the house of Levi Willson. Though always small, this group is known to have flourished as early as 1816, and it continued to meet for many years thereafter.⁵ But it too passed from the scene, perhaps weakened by Methodist toned dissentions of the kind affecting the Society of Friends at large. Ancaster was a noted centre of revivalism where many conversions took place, among them no doubt those of a few Friends.

Thus in the Hamilton region there was no proved stock onto which might be grafted the newer Quakerism growing up in our own era and representing influences quite different from those of which we are speaking. In a burgeoning technological society such as ours any continuity with the past is often too much to hope for, and this is a large part of the uncertainty with which we live. When historical roots are not altogether lacking, it is good to look back to them if only to realize how severe the problems of adaptation were then too. If they were not always surmounted, it is important to know why to better understand how individual conscience may find its way in the present. Anne Morden would probably be pleased to have this much of her Quakerism remembered.

- ¹Arthur Dorland, A History of the Society of Friends in Canada (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927), pp. 308-9.
- ²T. Roy Woodhouse, The History of the Town of Dundas (The Dundas Historical Society, 1965) p. 11. See also V.B. Blake, Spencer Creek Conservation Report (History) (Toronto: Department of Lands and Forests, 1962) pp. 44-7.
- ³George F. Playter, The History of Methodism in Canada (Toronto: Anson Green, 1862) p. 20.
- ⁴C.M. Johnston, The Head of the Lake: A History of Wentworth County (Hamilton: Wentworth County Council, 1958) p. 96.
- ⁵Dorland, p. 70.

Meeting House Memories

I. Milldale Meeting House

by

Bessie (Elizabeth) Sutton Dann

Norwich Monthly Meeting consisted of three Preparative Meetings--Milldale, Norwich (the 'Old Brick') and Beaconsfield. Milldale was the one I knew best as my father had charge of it and I was born in a small house, a short distance behind the Meeting house. Later we moved around the corner to a larger house on a farm belonging to William P. Barker who owned a good deal of land in that neighbourhood, and I believe, had a good deal to do in building the Meeting house, though I cannot give any dates as to when it was built.

It was a frame building--once painted white--and faced the west on the main road between Norwich and Otterville. To the north was a long shed where horses and buggies were put during meeting and beyond this was the graveyard where many of the pioneers of the district are buried.

The Meeting house was entered by double doors which opened into a lobby, one end of which was curtained off for the 'infant class'--in my earliest memory taught by Marianna Treffry. The other end was a cloak-room and had a stairway leading to a sort of gallery over the lobby. Double doors opened into the main room. There was a wood-box to the right, as you went in a large box stove stood nearby in the centre of which was fuelled by chunks of wood and a long string of stove

pipes, supported by iron rods with rings at one end and fixed to the ceiling went from the stove to the chimney at the far end.

The seats were unlike any I have ever seen anywhere and were of a reddish colour. There was a row on either side and some in the middle, some near the stove. In each corner the seats were arranged in a sort of enclosure where various Sunday school classes met and there was a platform at the east end, covered with a red carpet. It had a long seat on it and a table. During the opening and closing of Sunday school the superintendent and secretary were there, and during the Meeting for Worship, my father and Charles Treffry were seated there and until his death William Nobbs. He often offered prayer and I always liked to hear him--he always prayed for the Queen.

Sunday school was at 10 a.m. and Meeting followed at 11 a.m. There would be a period of silence, then probably a hymn. Marianna Treffry and her sister Emma Haight used to 'lead' the singing. There was a man who had a deep bass voice and loved to sing. He and his family were not Friends, but lived in the neighbourhood and always attended. As a child I used to think Mr. King had such a deep voice because he had such a black beard. There was a man who could not speak without stutting, but he could sing. His old father used to attend sometimes--his father carried a cane and always sat with his hands on the cane and his chin resting on them. His hair was snowy white and to me it always looked like a close-fitting cap.

Through the years we often had visiting Friends' ministers, some of whom held special evening Meetings. I cannot remember many of them but one of the earliest was William Allen, a negro minister from the U.S.A. He stayed at our home for awhile. I remember Alma Dale and there were others, but I am not sure of their names. My father used to sometimes 'exchange pulpits' with some of the ministers in Norwich or Otterville and sometimes took the service at the 'Old Brick'--this gave us Jay Stover, Fayette Barnes or William Weller for a change. He also taught a class of young people in the Baptist Sunday school at Otterville.

There were really very few Friends' families in connection with the Meeting and most of these lived at some distance, five or six miles, from the Meeting house. Most of the people living nearby attended more or less regularly. One family, that of Michael and Betsy Siple, attended regularly and their eldest son Michael was at one time a recorded minister and for a time had charge of the Meeting at Wooler. Later he left Friends and became a Baptist

minister. At one time the Barker family were prominent Friends and as I said before it was William P. Barker who built the Meeting house, and his son James Barker, who was the minister there.

I believe that Margaret Pennington and I are the only ones left who would remember Milldale Meeting and Sunday school as it once was. In 1898 we moved to Norwich to a house that had been given to Friends by William Barker, but we still went to Sunday school and Meeting at Milldale three miles away, often the children walked.

As I sit here in my quiet room at St. Jude's Retirement Home in Vancouver, B.C. the memories crowd so quickly that it is hard to sort them out. Whether this will be of any use to the Historical Association, I am not sure, but I have enjoyed writing it.

Next issue: II: "The Old Brick"

III: Beaconsfield, Hibbert and
Swarthmore (Sask.)