



*Yonge Street Meetinghouse, built between 1810-1812, from the south-west. The entrance, added in 1975 when the meetinghouse was raised and a basement added, replacing the women's conveniences built in 1822 . Photograph credits Andrew Cresswell.*

## **‘Choose what is simple and beautiful’<sup>1</sup>**

*by David Newlands*

We are gathered to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this meeting house and to offer our thanks to God for the lives of those who worshipped here over the years and the preservation of this building. The procession of Friends is witness to our faith and to the commitment of people over many generations to our understanding of the Christian revelation.

George Fox’s call for ‘all Friends every where, meet together’ emphasized the importance of the corporate experience of communion with God, during which each person expressed through prayer and silent waiting the expectation that the Holy Spirit

would guide him or her. Fox found support for this spiritual nature of worship in the New Testament where Christians were told to worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.

Meeting for Worship was without ritual or appointed leader as intermediary between the worshipper and God. During corporate worship God would speak to the gathered Friends, who, in turn, would share this encounter with the assembled group through vocal ministry. Over the generations many Friends have continued this traditional form of worship where no one commands or directs the meeting, except God. Imagine today the generations

---

<sup>1</sup> This injunction by London (now Britain) Yearly Meeting is quoted in Hubert Lidbetter, *The Friends Meeting House*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (York: William Sessions Ltd., 1979), 4.

of Friends who assembled in this meeting house waiting for God to speak to them, sharing the message with others and with renewed strength went forth to lead a life described by Thomas Kelley, of 'holy obedience'.

We celebrate the history of this building for what it represents, the public statement of Quaker faith, and the endurance of our way of worship from the earliest days of Upper Canada. This was the first place of worship of non-aboriginal settlers north of York (now Toronto) in Upper Canada. Much has been written about the settlement of Friends in this district and this doesn't need to be repeated here. What I want to do is to tell you about the restoration project that was begun in the 1973 and what it attempted to do and what, as the project progressed, we learned about this building and its past. This may be instructive for any future work of preservation or renovation at this site.

Some of you may recall the evening walk along Mullock Drive from Pickering College to this meeting house during Yearly Meeting time. Along the road from the College were fields and farms on either side. Others will remember their visits to the meeting house when there were only a few in attendance, but they were welcomed, often invited to lunch at someone's house.

I first worshipped in this building in the mid-1960s. Marion and I were married in this meeting house in April 1969, under the care of Kitchener Monthly Meeting. In preparation for the special day a small group of Friends from Kitchener came a week earlier to prepare the meetinghouse for the wedding. At that time the building was used only in the summer, and so the building had to be swept and dusted. When we arrived we saw that someone had been sleeping in the west half of the building. There was an accumulation of wine/

whiskey bottles and cigarette butts. After we learned that this was common each winter, my first reaction was that it was a 'miracle' that the building hadn't burnt down. The building gave the impression of being unused and attracted young people, who sat on the porch and, during their gatherings, smoked cigarettes. It became clear to me that, unless the building could be used year-round, the building's life span would be seriously reduced.

There was a small group of faithful Friends who worshipped here during the summer including Elma and Elmer Starr, Stuart Starr, Harry Beer, Sheldon and Sherita Clark, and Donald and Barbara Laitin and John and Barbara Horvath. From time to time there were visitors who, driving by noticed the government plaque and cars in the driveway, ventured to come in.

Marion and I felt that unless the Meeting could attract more people, it would eventually come to an end. The Trustees of the Meeting had anticipated this outcome in the 1920s when they sold the building and land to Charles Doane, one of the trustees, whose farm was directly south of the burial ground. The sale had the conditions that Friends could use the building for worship as long as they existed and that Charles Doane would maintain the structure for use by the Meeting during this time. The Meeting bought the property back in the early 1970s, except for a strip of land on the north edge of this property that was presumably for an entrance to that part of the Doane farm that was west of the meeting lot.

In 1972 I accepted a position with the Canadiana Department of the Royal Ontario Museum. Besides my work as an historical archaeologist, there was time to devote to taking a new look at the meeting house and seeing if the property could be

changed to provide year-round facilities.

I remember clearly the late summer afternoon in 1973 when a small group of us met here to discuss with B. Napier Simpson Jr. of Aurora -- a well-known restoration architect who was, among other achievements, the architect responsible for the restoration of buildings at Black Creek Pioneer Village -- what might be done to make the building useful year round. As the late afternoon sun shone through the windows in streams of yellow light and the crickets and flies filled the air with their soft sounds, we talked about potential changes and how they might be accomplished. Napier Simpson didn't say very much and I took that reaction as an indication that he wasn't particularly interested in any potential project. After all, it was clear that as a small group we had neither numbers nor money to back up our dreams. I telephoned him the next day and his reaction was perhaps most typical of what was to come. He said that his silence was because he was 'speechless'. He had no idea that a building in such original condition existed. He had passed the building often, as his office was in Aurora, but was completely unaware of what was inside.

We established an Improvement Committee consisting of the Trustees and other interested Friends. The Committee consisted of Harry Beer, Sheldon Clark, Eric Hall, Fritz Hertzberg, Fred Haslam, Barbara Horvath, Marjorie Keffer, Milton Keffer, Donald Laitin, Bill McMechan, Dorothy Muma, John Petrie, Stuart Starr and Elma Starr. The purpose of this Committee was to provide modern facilities for the Meeting and to preserve the fabric of the historic building. There were many ideas as to what to do. One Friend suggested we raise the roof and make a second storey for a 'caretaker', who could

monitor who came on the property. This would not be possible within the present structure and although the proposal was advanced frequently, it was finally abandoned. There was a suggestion that a modern extension on the west of the building would make it clear what was 'old' and what was 'new'. This is frequently done in the expansion of old churches, often to accommodate Sunday School rooms and/or a gymnasium or kitchen facilities. As we discussed this option we realized that wherever this was done it was equally unattractive. Another suggestion was to build a separate house on the property for a caretaker, but, as Napier Simpson mentioned from his own professional experience, this had never worked in other religious settings.

Napier Simpson remarked that Yonge Street had been raised significantly over the years as it was widened and paved. Originally it was on grade with the meeting house, but by the 1970s it was about three feet higher than the building. It would be possible to raise the meeting house, put a concrete basement underneath for modern facilities: furnace, washrooms with running water, kitchen and activity/First Day School room. A small entrance could be built on the west of the building that would enable access to the basement and the meeting room. This was the option that we felt was most respectful of the heritage features of the building, while providing for needs of Friends. Accompanying this was a commitment to restore the meeting house as carefully as possible to its original state and to stop and, if possible, to reverse the gradual changes that were destroying the historical accuracy of the building. The Improvement Committee also acted as the fundraising committee.

Napier Simpson brought to the team a trained 'eye' for heritage. Dorothy Duncan,



*An early twentieth-century image of the meetinghouse from the south-east where the driveway approached the building. Two doors are found on the south facade, providing separate entrances for men (east end) and women (west end). The doors are double-leafed, with three panels to each leaf. Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives, Pickering College.*

who was over many years a leading personality in the museum and heritage community of Ontario both as head of the Museum Branch in the Ontario Government and later as Executive Director of the Ontario Historical Society, gave many hours of her time and invaluable advice on many restoration details. She determined the original colour of the 'paint' on the building and this was reproduced in modern paint. The building was not originally white, but a burnt amber colour, which is the colour on the building now. She also arranged for a seamstress to make new cushions for the benches: cushions that were of a style that was not ecclesiastical, but suitable replacements for the mats that were on some of the benches. (An interesting aside to this was that the existing mats had old dresses as stuffing, offering an interesting source for the study of early clothing.) Dorothy also continued to offer support throughout the project. The fact that we had an outstanding restoration architect and a leading museum professional advising us, went a long way in helping us secure funds from the wider community whose major interest was not in Friends worship but in the preservation of a heritage building.

The project would not have been

successful without the support of members of the Rogers family. John Rogers and David Rogers of Toronto and Gregory Elias Rogers of Uxbridge were major contributors. John Rogers offered to discuss the project with members of the 'Rogers Family' and David Rogers worked with Napier Simpson when it came time to review the final drawings. When David Rogers saw the draft contract for the excavating he noticed the condition that if large boulders or streams were found during the excavating that there would be an additional charge for work. He cautioned that we should never sign a contract with such 'open' conditions. We eventually agreed with the contractor to share 50/50 any additional costs. The contractor did encounter several very large boulders under the meetinghouse and two streams. Gregory Elias Rogers, a descendant of Timothy Rogers, presented to the Yonge Street Meeting the original Journal of Timothy Rogers, founder of Newmarket. This was deposited in the Canadian Yearly Meeting (Quaker) Archives. We did use a quote from the Journal on the public notice boards for the project which was: "...Let justice guide thy hand, benevolence warm thy heart & the spirit of truth inspire thee with all religious devotions."

Our approach to fundraising was to make the purpose and cost of the work known to those whom we felt would be both interested in the Quaker heritage and able to help financially. We did not employ any special devices: no wall of donors, no naming of rooms or special public notice. We did write about the project and launched a newsletter and sent out information to the 'media'. We had the help of Jo Carsons, a feature writer of the *Globe and Mail*, who wrote a detailed article about the work, Zena Cherry who mentioned the

work in one of her daily columns, and there were articles in the *Toronto Star*, the *Newmarket Era* and the Royal Ontario Museum's publication called *Rotunda*. We raised over \$185,000 for the work, a sizeable sum of money in the 1970s for a small group of Friends.

The building was lifted on blocks, mechanical earthmovers went under the building and a very substantial concrete foundation was poured. Napier Simpson said he did not want any stress on the old wooden building and so the foundation was substantial enough for a multi-story building. There was only about one foot of dry rot on the sills of the building and a slight bow in the floor, which had to be accommodated in the shaping of the top of the foundation. Eventually the meeting house was replaced on its new, higher foundations and dirt was brought in to establish a level grade with Yonge Street. (Unfortunately, the grading was never fully completed.) A new entrance was built on the west side in such a way as to avoid damaging the large tree that was there. The new entrance required the demolition of a two-seater dry toilet that had been added to the building in the 1820s. An exit was made from the basement to the outside on the northeast corner of the building. This second exit from the basement was required by fire codes.

Over the years there had been a number of gradual changes to the inside of the meeting house that had affected the character of the building and the heritage value of the structure. In an attempt to improve the present condition of the floor, sanding and refinishing was done. The sanding gouged the old boards and the finishing was entirely out of character for the building. In an effort to overcome the scratching of the old benches, a coat of dark stained varnish was put on some of

the benches on the east side. This can be noticed as a rough finish to the wood. If we had had the resources, I would have recommended the lengthy and costly process of restoring the floor and benches.

There were two changes on the outside. The pillars holding the front porch up had rotted and were replaced with shorter pillars, the difference being made up by a block between the top of the pillar and the porch. You can see these blocks on old pictures of the meetinghouse. Likewise, the roof shingles needed to be replaced and the Meeting wrote to H.R. MacMillan in British Columbia asking for assistance in replacing these. He arranged for British Columbia style wooden shingles to be available, but these are much thicker than the original shingles on the building, which would have been thin Ontario shingles. Although we would have liked to replace the shingles, we felt that they still had some life and that to remove them would have been a waste of resources, as well, we did not have the funds to re-roof the entire meeting house.

There were a number of issues related to the age and use of the building. The doors leading to the outside open inward, which was as originally planned; current fire codes require that such doors open outward. We did not change the direction of opening as the number of Friends in the building at any one time would have been a small number and to change the doors would have been an unfortunate compromise of the original plan. The doors were originally with rising butt hinges, but in some instances their replacements were ordinary hinges. The rising butt hinge enables the door to fit snugly to the floor and when opening raise up to permit easy use without sticking. We found a firm in the US that produced the kind of rising butt hinges that we needed and these were installed. Most of the windowpanes were

original. We replaced only those that had been cracked, and these with modern glass panes.

At the time of the restoration it was known that the land to the south and west of the meeting house would be developed for housing, as well as the land on the other side of Yonge Street opposite the meeting house. Allan Trimble, a landscape architect, prepared as his contribution to the project a landscape plan that used only native species to create a hedgerow to provide a visual barrier on the western edge of the property. We also had suggestions for re-landscaping the cemetery property, but this was not in the care of the Meeting. The landscaping plans were never implemented for lack of money. The drawings are in the Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives at Pickering College and you can see what this would have looked like if implemented forty years ago. It would have provided a 'relaxed' and attractive barrier.

The colour of the outside of the building was used in the new entrance to carry on the feeling of the old into the new. The basement was to be modern. There were several problems that we had to face. First, with two streams running under the building, it was necessary to have a sump pump. But what would happen to the basement if there were a storm and the electricity failed? If we were to have a functioning kitchen, where would we get water? There were no public services on the west side of Yonge Street south of the York Manor and the municipality was not willing to extend the services as it would encourage the developer to question why the mains could not be continued on to their land on the south of the cemetery. The Town of Newmarket did permit us to get water from the mains on the east side of Yonge Street and so we arranged to drill under Yonge Street to connect with mains

on the other side.

For many years there has been a provincial heritage sign on the property. So that the sign would not interfere with sight lines from Yonge Street to the building, it was replaced on the northeast side of the building and not in the center of the building. We had hoped to have the building declared a national heritage building, which means it would be considered the 'best' example of a meeting house type of building in Canada. The conclusion of a study by the National Monuments Board of Canada on meeting house architecture in Canada suggested that the best example of a Quaker Meetinghouse was the Sparta Meeting House in Sparta, Ontario.

When it came time to discuss the furnishings for the basement we had the help of George Sanders, of the Toronto Meeting, who was on the faculty of Ryerson Polytechnic (now Ryerson University). I recall his description of a project he gave to his interior design students. They were sent to church halls, public buildings, prisons, and other institutions to see the kind of finishes and furnishings. They came back with the same conclusion: regardless of what the building was for, they all seem to have pained concrete walls, tiled floors and tubular metal stacking chairs and tables. Whether a prison reception room or a church hall it didn't seem to matter.

But it did matter to us, for we wanted a warm and friendly place for young people and other users. George helped us choose stacking elm wood chairs with green covers, special carpeting that would, if flooded, be able to be dried without permanent damage and carpeting that was soft enough for young Friends to sit and play on the floor. Janet Chattin, a Friend from Toronto, agreed to provide a macramé wall hanging

representing the four seasons. A number of Friends from the Toronto Meeting presented this to Yonge Street as their contribution.

The project ended, but it was not completed. The restoration of benches in the eastern side of the room, restoration of the damaged floor, completion of the grading from the Meeting House to Yonge Street and the implementation of a landscaping plan and replacing the present shingles on the roof all remained to be done.

In retelling the story of the restoration project almost forty years ago, I hope I haven't forgotten to give credit to either individuals or organizations that helped make the project a success. It took the commitment of many people to see the project to its final stage.

What can be said about the use of this heritage building for the future needs of Friends? The best advice is in Britain Yearly Meeting's *Quaker Faith and Practice*. It states,

A meetinghouse should not be regarded primarily in terms of bricks and mortar...its real value derives from the worship and service of the meeting. Even so, our meeting houses no less than our own homes deserve our care, attention and imaginative thought, so that they may be attractive both to ourselves and to others. Care of our premises is an important and sometimes exacting responsibility, which should be exercised by or on behalf of the meeting to which it belongs. Managing trustees and premises committees should be

vigilant so that small defects do not pass unnoticed and lead in the future to extensive and costly repairs. It is recommended that premises be inspected at regular intervals by a surveyor or architect.<sup>2</sup>

From the seventeenth century in England, Quakers have built and used meeting houses as an expression of their religious beliefs and as a focal point for a community of Friends. The meeting house was the clearinghouse for the Quaker community, the place where the 'Quaker Way of Life' was most evident. As we continue to search for the Will of God, actively seeking the Light of Christ to guide us and enlighten the world, let us continue to remember the past with respect and to use our meeting houses to do what God is calling us to do--to heal our fractured world--and to help bring the Kingdom of God on earth.

It is my prayer that this meeting house will continue to be a symbol of Friends presence in the area, a place for people to meet and worship, a resource for community groups, and a contribution to the heritage of the Province.

*August 6, 2012*

---

<sup>2</sup> Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1995), 15.14.