

**The Quaker Open Access Digital Database:  
Families, Land, and Migration in British North America**



*Or, how a thirty-year-old box of index cards came to life as an  
interdisciplinary research project*

*Greg Finnegan, Robynne Rogers Healey, and Sydney Harker*

What do you get when you throw together a thirty-year-old box of index cards, a keen historical geographer, a busy Quaker historian, and a clever, perceptive graduate student? An exciting new research project in Canadian Quaker history! In the summer of 2016 Drs. Greg Finnegan and Robynne Rogers Healey along with master's student, Sydney Harker, will commence work on what they hope will be phase one of an open access digital database of Quakers in British North America. This phase of the project, funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

of Canada (SSHRC) Institution Grant and a Trinity Western University (TWU) Provost Research Grant, is a tremendous opportunity to use technological advances to collect a variety of accessible and functional data on one Quaker community, Adolphustown, Upper Canada. Not only will the database be accessible to anyone doing research in Quaker history or family history. It will become a collaborative project of its users. Using crowdsourcing, researchers with new information will be able to add to the database. Our goal is to create the most up-to-date, comprehensive



*Greg Finnegan*

database on each Quaker community in British North America. The value of this project to genealogists and historians now and in the future is remarkable! We are excited to see it launch in 2017, and welcome contributions from anyone with documented family history data. Who would have thought that a thirty-year-old box of index cards that has been hauled from pillar to post across Canada would ever be the seed of such a project? As Friends say, the way opened. This is the story of that box of cards and its unlikely route to a significant research project with immense possibility for the future of Quaker history in Canada.

#### *Greg's Story*

In the summer of 1987 I found myself in a windowless room in Atkinson College at York University being paid by Professor David Wood to find sources for the population of early Upper Canada. Wood was researching *Plate 4 Eastern Canada, Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume II, The Land Transformed*. When I stumbled upon

the Adolphustown Population Returns 1794-1822, I recognized in these records the names of people whom I thought were Quakers. Names such as Dorland, Casey, and Haight caught my attention as did Maybee and Van Alstine, which I had certainly heard about in my readings on Upper Canadian history, specifically in the works of Arthur Dorland (1927) and William Canniff (1869). At the time historical research was very much an archival quest and finding related information on these distant and rather obscure individuals seemed beyond reach. Wood suggested a trip to the Quaker Archives in Pickering, Ontario which I started to plan. In the meantime, I trucked down the Spadina Expressway to the Archives of Ontario to explore the Adolphustown Township Papers (or the Township Box), to search for early maps of the region and to access the Land Records, then on microfilm. In this case I was looking for the Abstract Index to Deeds for the township and the listings for the original land grants and various musters of United Empire Loyalists in the region. What I found was a wealth of data upon which to paint a portrait of the early demography of this earliest of Upper Canadian settlements. That autumn, I made it to Pickering College where the Canadian Yearly Meeting Archives (CYMA) are housed. There I was met by a wise and wonderful archivist, Jane Zavitz, who transformed my academic training and sent me down a rabbit hole of Quaker studies. She helped me to publish an earlier version of the Adolphustown research in *Canadian Journal of Quaker History* in Winter 1995, a follow-up to a paper presented at the biennial Conference of Quaker Historians and Archivists when it was hosted at

Guilford College in 1994.

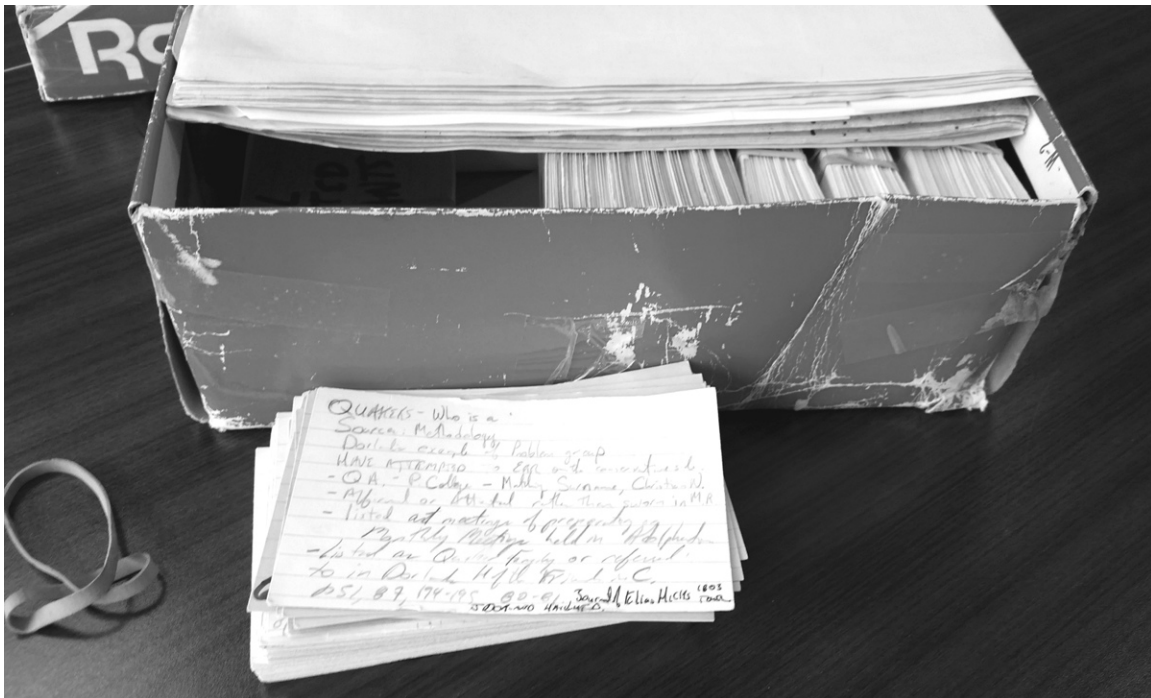
My research findings started to confirm my belief that Adolphustown was just not another Church of England, Loyalist settlement but one that harboured non-conformist Quakers who had clearly hitched a ride north with the Loyalist refugees. So I found Philip Dorland, a land owner and Quaker, who, although elected to the first legislature in Upper Canada, could not take his seat as he was unwilling to swear an oath of allegiance to the Crown. I also found a Captain Thomas Dorland, his brother, who was willing to take the oath of allegiance, and, in very non-pacifist manner, served as an officer, fought in the American Revolutionary War, and was disowned by his meeting. Philip and Thomas lived side-by-side on adjoining lots in the community and, although one

was the leader of the Quaker community and the other disowned from it, they *were* brothers and neighbours. Given the formidable frontier on which they found themselves, with its virgin stands of ancient forests and its hostile neighbours to the south, they were probably heavily dependent on each other.

At that time I was labouring with data gathering and, as we did in those days, I wrote all of my research entries onto 3 x 5 lined index cards. Let's remember that laptops may have been available, but they were prohibitively expensive with the Toshiba T1100 in 1985 running \$4000 USD. That included the bells and whistles of a black and white screen and floppy disks for the operating system! It was also known as luggable rather than portable. Using the records I found, I generated



*Map of Adolphustown from Illustrated historical atlas of the counties of Hastings and Prince Edward, Ont. (Toronto : H. Belden & Co., 1878.)*



cards for each lot of land and its history of patenting and transactions through to the 1820s. I also recorded cards for each household from the population returns. There were cards for grantees and patentees (often not the same person for each lot), cards for listed UEL members called to musters, cards for... well, you get the impression. There were a lot of sortable cards! What I was able to do during this period was to link the population and land records to the Adolphustown Monthly Meeting records at the CYMA. Between 1987 and 1994 I completed my doctoral dissertation, first fulltime and then part-time, on Canadian banking, a totally different topic. At the same time, I taught at universities and worked at the National Atlas of Canada. But I kept working away on the Quaker research. Then, with the thesis finished the degree granted, I wandered from academia due to a lack of open positions and into land development and socio-economic consulting and analysis. My diligently composed cards kept

following me around. From Toronto to Ottawa to Vancouver (the three municipalities of West Van, North Van and Vancouver itself), and finally to Whitehorse, Yukon where they should not have come since I had given up on the work and had slated the cards for removal!

Over those years, and through those moves, I confess that I often looked at the cards and thought about the wealth of data involved in those two shoeboxes, but I never really had time to do much with them. However, at coffee one day in the winter of 2008 I got to talking to a local woman who I often saw in the mornings, a kind of java-connection friend. Lo and behold, she told me she held an unrecognized Quaker meeting for worship at her house in Whitehorse. When I asked about her name I recognized it immediately as one of my Adolphustown Quaker families, and I invited her to come look at my cards. In that shoebox she found many references to her family members. Happy to have helped her find some of her family

relations, the germination of an idea develop but that's as far as things got at that time.

Again into hibernation the cards went until in 2015 when I found myself with time on my hands while I went through cancer radiation treatments. I pulled out the cards and began place them into an excel file system. Okay I was bored stiff, but that memory of the cards as a source for family history was germinating away for all those years. At this time I went online and searched Upper Canadian research efforts on Quakers and found that a Quaker scholar named Robynne Rogers Healey had published on the Yonge Street Quakers. She was resident at Trinity Western University only a scant 1500 miles south of me (we Yukoners measure distance differently than most people because we are so isolated). I quickly sent Robynne (well quickly after thirty years) an e-mail introducing myself and describing the data that I had. I also sent her a copy of the original paper I had submitted for the *Journal of Historical Geography* and received a warm and inviting reply back from her. I quickly wrapped up my shoebox of 3 x 5 index cards and generated a series of Excel templates upon which to build the database and with great trepidation (remember, I had been holding onto these cards for thirty years) mailed them away. I mean I had less anxiety about my first born heading off to university in Halifax at seventeen years of age than I had with sending off these records. Robynne had suggested that one of her graduate students could labour away on getting all the data entered into excel spreadsheets from which we could then generate research projects and in time a digital history archive with which to share our research.



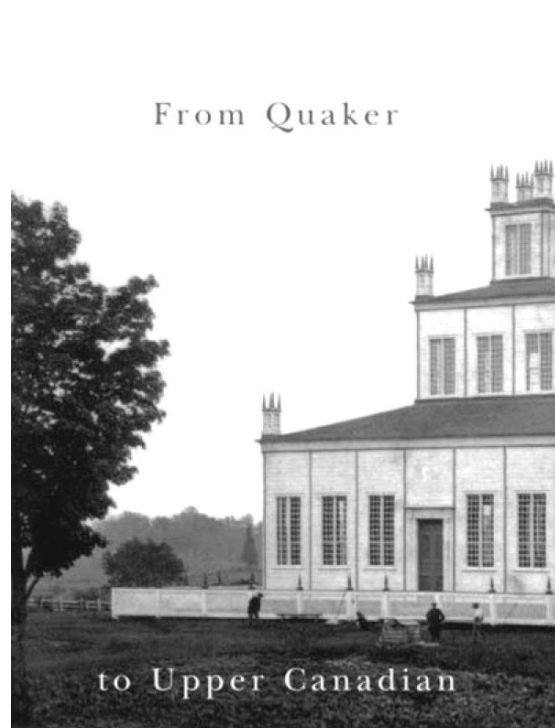
*Robynne Rogers Healey*

#### *Robynne's Story*

September 2015 was a busy month at the beginning of an extremely busy academic year. Not only did we have two weddings on our farm in September (our daughter at the beginning of the month and our niece at the end of the month), but in addition to my teaching and administrative responsibilities, I had signed contracts for three separate book chapters and there were three books sitting on my desk with deadlines for review. It was in that context that I received a very pleasant email from Greg towards the end of September. Greg highlighted his past work in Canadian Quaker history, his connection to the Conference of Quaker Historians and Archivists (which I now convene), and attached a copy of the paper originally published in the *Quaker History Newsletter*, which had been revised and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Historical Geography*. Life had taken over and that paper had not been published. "Now many

years later,” wrote Greg, “I know that the paper may still be relevant and useful to Quaker scholarship, but truly need a co-author to help get it out the door and updated.” I promised Greg I’d have a look at the paper as soon as I was able. By mid-October, I responded: “Clarify for me what you’d like to do with the paper.... If you want to update and pursue publishing in a peer-reviewed journal, I’d be happy to co-author with you if that’s what you’re looking for. However, my own schedule right now means I can’t take on one more thing until next summer (May 2016). ... If you’re willing to wait until the spring, I’m really interested.” Thus began our unlikely collaboration.

What are the chances that a statistician from the Yukon and a Quaker historian from a small university in Langley, British Columbia would connect over this project? (As a statistician, Greg could probably supply that number. For me, it seemed to be one of those things that I have experienced numerous times in Quaker history. Unlikely opportunities present themselves and the way opens. For some reason, it always opens.) In 2006 I had published a book with McGill-Queen’s University Press on Yonge Street Friends (*From Quaker to Upper Canadian: Faith and Community among Yonge Street Friends, 1801-1850*), but my work had increasingly focussed on Quakers in the transatlantic world and the peace testimony. It had been some years since I had done research in Canadian Quaker history. Moreover, I’m a social historian; my interest is in the people and their stories. Greg is a statistician; his strength is in numbers. And did I mention I was busy? I honestly didn’t know how I could fit in *one more project*. But not only is Greg’s enthusiasm infectious, his



FAITH AND COMMUNITY AMONG YONGE STREET  
FRIENDS, 1801-1850 ROBYNNE ROGERS HEALEY

collaborative spirit is irresistible. Beyond that, there was a brilliant young graduate student beginning our MA program in January 2016. She was not yet committed to any particular course of research and, when that box of index cards appeared in my mailbox, I wondered if Sydney might be interested in working as a research assistant even before she began the program.

Sydney was very eager to take on the work of research assistant for this project. It is a rare occasion when a graduate student is handed a set of raw data compiled through years of hard work. What an opportunity! I remember Sydney coming to my office in the fall and me opening up the beaten-up shoebox of cards (the box has since been reinforced with packing tape) to show her the index cards. “This, Sydney, is how we used to do research in the olden days,” I told her. “Your job is to put all the information on these cards into a

database so that we can mine the data.” Sydney went off and dutifully entered all the data and learned a great deal in the process. When she began her program in January, I had the privilege of introducing her to my field of Quaker history. She will relate her own experiences with the documents, both the data from Greg and the Quaker meeting records accessed through Ancestry and the Canadian Friends Historical Association website. Her work on families in the Adolphustown/West Lake Meetings is already very promising.

As the three of us began to work through the data in Greg’s shoebox, it became apparent that there were many possibilities for further research. Greg’s data, taken from population counts, is household data. Sydney and I wanted to know more about the people who occupied each household. Beyond that, the capacity to mine the data, or map the data using new GIS (Geographic Information Systems) technologies was promising. Greg visited campus in February and we agreed we would apply for a grant through our internal grant competition. As we worked through the grant application for a project on Adolphustown, it was clear that this project should be phase one of a much larger database project on Quakers in British North America (pre-Confederation Canada).

### *Sydney’s Story*

When I first heard from Robynne that there was an opening to work as her research assistant on an exciting project with raw-data, needless to say I absolutely leapt at the opportunity. I hadn’t yet started my graduate program at Trinity Western University, but I was keenly waiting to



*Sydney Harker with the box*

resume my studies after completing my undergraduate degree in history in April of 2015. Between graduating and planning for what would come next, I had been working in politics and keeping myself busy with the upcoming federal election. It had taken me a little while to figure out where I wanted to be after graduating and what path I would take, but I couldn’t stay away from school, and the promise of a new project was just too tempting. The story of the shoebox drew me in instantly, and it was hard not to catch the excitement that Robynne and Greg already had for this project. However, I will admit that when I received the shoebox and began to go through it, I was a little unsure of what to make of it all. I began entering the information as told over a number of weeks, with the shoebox even following me on my Christmas holiday as I made my way through the index cards, adding post-it notes where I couldn’t

decipher Greg's handwriting (sorry Greg), or was unclear on various terms.

At first, the names and information on the cards had no real meaning to me, but I began to see patterns emerge and names line up. I started to recognize certain family names and wondered about the connections that might exist between them. Any information jotted beside a name, whether that be a birth date, the name of a wife or child, even time served in the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada, it all added tangible facts to the stories unfolding before me. As Robynne mentioned, I was so interested in who these people were and how they operated on this frontier township. My curiosity won out and I began researching and looking into who some of these people were, specifically the Quaker families, and asking questions about why they had come to Adolphustown, what their background was, and the connections they had left behind in America. The more questions asked and family information given, the more complex narratives and identities have become. Questions surrounding Loyalist and faith ties have raised issues regarding the narratives that have been passed on for generations surrounding pioneer families. Although I found family information and history in various genealogy texts, some of the richest information I came across was from descendants of these people posting their findings and thoughts about their family's history online. Material such as transcribed wills and anecdotes about certain members existed, though I knew there was a great deal left to discover.

Although working with the index card data and Quaker meeting minutes from both the Adolphustown Monthly Meeting and the West Lake Preparative Meeting has

proved challenging and rewarding, it would be amazing to gather more family stories and narratives, whether that be in the form of diaries, account books, or any other source that reveals lived experience in Adolphustown. Many times I have come to Robynne with questions about decisions the Meeting made, or didn't make, that seemed inconsistent and simply haven't been able to find out the story behind it all. As Robynne has said to me many times, "The minutes are silent." While they do reveal so much, there is still a wealth of information hidden that without personal documents is out of our reach. This is even more so in terms of the material on the index cards, where the word "widow" beside a name gives the tiniest glimpse into the life of that person, but again, leaves out so much. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of my research has been seeing that people have already begun asking the questions that I find myself having. Seeing family members reach out to others online for any information or explanations regarding their Adolphustown ancestors has shown that this truly is a collaborative effort, and I hope it will continue to be so.

At this point in my research, I have tentatively completed the first paper in the research series on how the Quaker's faith played out in the community life of Adolphustown. I must say, the Adolphustown Friends have absolutely enticed me and I can't wait to pursue further research on this community that lived out their faith in a remote Upper Canadian town.

*Where to from here?*

Thirty years after the first information was written on those 3 x 5 index cards, we



have received a SSHRC Institution and Provost Research Grant to fund Sydney's work for Summer 2016 and to have maps created for papers and conference presentations. One paper will be presented at the Conference of Quaker Historians and Archivists, held this year at Woodbrooke Quaker Studies Centre in Birmingham, UK. We are in the midst of preparing two papers for publication; both are based on the original research of the late 1980s. We have also started to look at alternative ways of combining the data sets that were generated in the dimly lit past. As we have the land grant locations and the land ownership data we can now go back and try to make spatial, or geographic if you wish, sense of the original population returns which were printed without locational references. This will help us understand the probable location of not just the land-owning households, as shown in the returns, but also those landless households which were enumerated by the assessor between the land-owning households. Then we can see if any parts of the township were missed by the assessors in their yearly tramps along the concession lines and through the backwoods acquiring assessment data. We believe that early census takers, as well as assessors, often missed people. If the weather was particularly bad during these tours, or the roads impassable they could have done a very poor job of data collection. By mapping the assessor's work we can start to evaluate the quality of the data they collected.

Our research agenda is not only dependent on the archival records, but, importantly, on you, our fellow Quaker family historians! With your participation in the project we will be able to trace the

paths of these early British North American settlers from their homes of origin in colonial America, Great Britain, or even the Netherlands through to their settlement in Adolphustown, and their migration westward, back to the United States, or even back across the Atlantic to Great Britain. This project demonstrates how the early land records of Upper Canada can be used to create a more complete picture of the Quaker religious community on the frontier and its response to forced migration, the need to re-establish its sense of spiritual order on the frontier, and the ways Quakers worked, lived, and built community alongside their Anglican, Methodist, and Christian Reform neighbours

The revival of this project thirty years on, and especially the ability to garner research funding after all this time, indicates that the role of religious minorities, demographic research on settlement patterns in the distant past, as well as the history of land acquisition and political influence are still current. Today we can take these 3 x 5 index cards copied from archival records, originally viewed in dimly lit alcoves, into the digital world. Crowdsourcing will bring these records into a public forum where our research can take on a new place in an online world, sharing knowledge that can help develop new insights into Quaker, British North American and transatlantic histories. The journey of the box of index cards is not yet complete!

For more information on this project, or to contribute your documented family histories from Adolphustown, please contact: Greg Finnegan ([greg.finnegan@northwestel.net](mailto:greg.finnegan@northwestel.net)) or Robynne Rogers Healey ([robynne.healey@twu.ca](mailto:robynne.healey@twu.ca)).