

Gunpowder Friends Meeting, Sparks, Maryland

a Brief History

By Marshall O. Sutton



Gunpowder

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The beginnings of the Religious Society of Friends take place in the northwest part of England in the 17th century, a time of religious reformation. Oliver Cromwell replaced the King, and the Puritan parliament was in power. Separatists and independent sects flourished during this time of profound unrest and personal seeking for inner peace. The Quaker movement began with the religious openings of several “seekers” in Westmorland, but particularly George Fox, who experienced after many fruitless conversations with the Christian leaders of his time, that “Christ is come to teach his people himself.” This was not an intellectual construct. He came to this experimental discernment alone like “seekers” before him. In this unsettled restless time he was in touch with many others who had similar “openings,” and it was the power of the spiritual gifts of George Fox that drew groups of seekers together to wait in the silence with expectation that the living Presence would empower the spirit deep within all regardless of outward situation. Small groups began to meet in this unprogrammed format in silence and intense belief in the guidance of God in the moral decisions of daily life. The power of the movement was such that those gifted in public ministry traveled beyond England. One Elizabeth Harris visited Maryland in 1655 or 56, drawing together small groups of Puritans on the western shore of Maryland and on Kent Island.

One of her converts, Charles Bayly, describes one of the worship groups which Elizabeth Harris brought together in 1655- 56 (quoted in a history of Third Haven Meeting by Kenneth Carroll): “And then when I had found this beloved life and people, I was like a man overjoyed in my heart; not only because I saw the sudden fruits and effects of it, both in my heart, and in others, insomuch that in a short time we became all to be as one entire family of love, and were drawn together in His life (which was His Light in

us) to wait upon him in stillnesse and quietnesse of God's Spirit, in which we were often refreshed together, and in one another."

Weekly meetings began at the mouth of the Patuxent at the Clifts, at Herring Creek, West River, Severn, and the Eastern Shore. As in England, the convincements among Puritans spread rapidly. Other traveling Friends' ministers (1656-72) built upon the labors of Elizabeth Harris. Persecuted Puritans were fleeing into Maryland and settling as far north as Baltimore County. The movement was consolidated by the visit of George Fox in 1672-3, who landed at the mouth of the Patuxent and spent his first night ashore at the home of James Preston, convinced in 1658, and at whose home for a period the provincial Assembly of Maryland met. George Fox spent half of his time in America visiting among Friends in Maryland, large Meetings being held at West River and over on the Eastern Shore at Easton. During the 1680s and 90s, Friends' families moved up the Patapsco and Gunpowder Rivers near Western Run. Thomas Chalkly reports in his Journal (1706), "I had divers meetings as I traveled on the road, as at Nottingham, Elk- river, North East, Susquehanna, Bush and Gunpowder rivers. . . ." We can entertain the probability that there were Friends worshiping in this area well before Chalkly's visit in 1706. Later in his journal on a second visit to Maryland Chalkly says (1738), ". . . we went to Gerard Hopkins', and from thence to Patapsco, had a large meeting, the house being full before the friends came, so that they were hard set to get in, to me it was a good, seasonable opportunity, as was our next in the forest of Gunpowder river, where friends have built a new meeting house, which at this time, could not contain the people." There are no remains of the "new Meeting house" visited by Thomas Chalkly mentioned above. Land records of Baltimore County indicate it was "on a run called the Shawwan cabin branch" on a tract

of land belonging to John and Thomas Colegate. The Geodetic Survey of 1940 refers to this small creek as “Oregon run” located a short distance behind the “old Gunpowder” Meeting House, which still stands. The first records of Friends at Gunpowder appear in 1739 when the second Monthly Meeting of Western Quarterly Meeting was established with Preparative Meetings at Patapsco and Gunpowder.

In the 18th century, Friends were moving south from Pennsylvania. The Moore family was one. Ann Moore, an appointed representative to Quarterly Meeting, reported “regular week-day and first-day Meetings at Gunpowder.” John Woolman, traveling Friends Minister from Mt. Holly, N.J, visited Gunpowder Quarterly Meeting at Gunpowder on one of his six visits to Maryland. His spirit was troubled by Friends who held their fellow human beings in bondage. In this ministry he humbled himself by walking from Meeting to Meeting as he met with slave owners. As a result of his labors and the labors of others from the Eastern Shore, along with epistles with queries asking for answers from London and Philadelphia, Gunpowder Friends were mostly free of holding slaves by 1778.

The Journal of Joseph Oxley, English Friend, traveling minister and watch maker, reports on travel rigors and his visit to Gunpowder in 1770: “We put shackles on our horses, bells about their necks; racked up what leaves we could get, and carried into camp to lie on, which, with the help of our saddles bags, great coats etc., made a good bed, after feeding horses, making our suppers, went to rest very comfortably... First day rode to Gunpowder. It was a very large Meeting. We had each an opportunity, as also had Ann Moore, but for all this, the state of the Meeting was low, and not open. One said Friend Ann Moore, went with us after meeting to dinner. . . “ (*Friends Library* Vol. 2, 456-459).

Still standing is “old Gunpowder” Meeting House, mentioned above, built in 1773 on Beaver Dam Road not far from the present location of the new Meeting House on Priceville, Road . The “old Meeting House” on Beaver Dam Road is 20 x 40 ft., two-and-a-half stories high, and has fireplaces at diagonally opposite corners. Its unusual style is described in detail in *Tidewater Maryland Architecture and Garden* (1956) by Henry Forman. In the burial ground behind the Meeting House, surrounded by a stone wall, there remain a few old stones of the Matthews and Scott families. It is now the residence of a family that has preserved as much as possible of the original framing, indoor wood work, and all of the outside stone work.

The post-Revolutionary period brought many changes. Three ministers of Gunpowder Monthly Meeting are deceased, namely Ann Moore, John Maulsby, and Hannah Scott. Patapsco Preparative Meeting moved to Baltimore and became an independent Baltimore Monthly Meeting; Elk Ridge (Ellicott City) became a Preparative Meeting of Baltimore; Gunpowder Monthly Meeting then consisted of only Little Falls and Gunpowder Preparative Meetings. Little Falls became an independent Monthly Meeting in 1815.

Friends continued to move to Baltimore County early in the 19th century, some into the Belfast and Western Run areas, some of them coming from Pennsylvania. Gunpowder decided, in 1821, to build a new Meeting House on higher ground on Priceville Road. On the building committee were Mordecai Price, Thomas Scott, Jesse Scott, Eli Matthews and John Price. The one-story floor plan of 56 x 32 feet was larger than the “old building” and built at a cost of \$1,396. It burned in 1886 but was rebuilt the same year using native field stone. John Price built a large brick house now standing on the Quaker Bottom Road to help with overnight hospitality at the

time of Quarterly Meeting.

After reaching a peak of 189 before the U.S. Civil War, membership declined for a number of reasons, including migration west and to nearby cities. The protestant evangelical movement in America and England in the 19th century affected Baltimore City Meetings, but there was little change at Gunpowder, as in most rural Meetings. The Minutes of 1828 immediately following that year's disruptive Yearly Meeting in Baltimore are silent. Almost every Meeting had a day school. The records note that in 1876 Mary E. Scott held school in a room attached to the 1821 meeting house on Priceville Rd.

By 1910, membership was down to 53. Minutes from the 1920s through the 1940s signal the meeting's broad involvement in matters both local and global. Gunpowder member Richard Taylor, on the staff of the American Friends Service Committee, was engaged in relief work in Poland from 1921- 25, and Gunpowder Friends followed and supported the work of the AFSC. In 1933, member Henry Matthews hosted a talk by Bliss Forbush on "Life in Palestine." By the mid 1930s, concerns arose about the growing trend towards compulsory military training in colleges: Friends wrote letters to their representatives and senators on this matter. They also wrote a petition, signed by more than 80 Friends, for an investigation of the "munitions industry."

Locally, Gunpowder Friends were involved in prison reform, regularly visiting local jails throughout the 1920s and 30s to ensure that incarcerated individuals were well cared for. Supporting the emergence of the local Public Health Service, encouraging high standards in schools, and ensuring that Baltimore County's Alms House was adequately caring for its most vulnerable citizens are concerns minuted by Gunpowder Friends during this

period.

The minutes from this period also reflect an active involvement in the life of the Quarterly Meeting (now known as Chesapeake) and Baltimore Yearly Meeting, with representatives consistently sent to both bodies for report and consultation. Friends kept old Gunpowder Meeting House active by holding Meetings for Worship there four times each year. Photographs of both Meeting Houses and a brief history of Gunpowder were included in an exhibit at the General Conference of Friends at Cape May, New Jersey in July of 1928.

By the late 1930s, illness and inclement weather were frequently cited as reasons for the cancellation of Monthly Meeting. By 1940, treasurer I. Waugh Matthews minuted that “it was impossible to get the four remaining [trustees] of gunpowder Meeting together,” and he had to consult with them individually to hear their “consent to selling the Old Meeting House.” Thus began a quiet period in the history of Gunpowder: there were no regularly scheduled Monthly Meetings between 1942 and 1957. By 1950, membership had declined to 20.

The Matthews family, living within walking distance of the Meeting House, kept the Meeting open for worship. When I. Waugh Matthews died in 1957, the Meeting House was filled to overflowing at his Memorial Meeting. Citizens of Cockeysville, in consultation with Friends who attended the Memorial Meeting, removed the old school addition from the Meeting House and built a spacious covered porch, which was so inviting in this rural setting that Meetings for Worship resumed. Six families with children—the Matthews (including Jack Matthews), Passmore, Simon, Sexton, Huffman, and Schlitz families—joined with others on the porch in summer months. In winter, a wood stove in the Meeting House provided warmth. Needed

repairs were made. Clerk Jack Matthews recorded in the Gunpowder Minute Book this sense of gathering energy: “After a lapse of a number of years . . . Gunpowder is now alive again” (August 1957). Gunpowder Friends took a photograph of themselves on the Meeting House porch in 1958 and sent it to the Baltimore Yearly Meeting *Interchange* as witness to their re-enlivened Meeting.

In 1979, Stony Run Friends built a Friends Lifetime Care Center, Broadmead, on the edge of Cockeysville four miles from the Gunpowder Meeting House. A few Friends from Broadmead began attending Meeting on Priceville Road, and by 1990, more Friends were transferring their membership to Gunpowder. Adult religious education in various forms sprouted up, including Quakerism 101, Bible study, and Spiritual Formation. Attenders came regularly and some, convinced, became members.

In the 21st century space became cramped. A two-room addition, a new porch, inside plumbing, and an expansion of parking space have been added. It is not unusual to have 35 or 40 present for Worship on First-day mornings, and we continue to worship on the porch in the summer.

An excerpt from the Minutes of Gunpowder Meeting 21st Third Month 2004 reflects the discerned spiritual state of the Gunpowder Meeting: “All are invited to participate in spiritual community through such activities as the annual Spiritual Formation Program, Bible study, and Quakerism classes. We have a silent retreat day one Saturday a month for those who desire an extended period of silence. . . . There is a lack of unity in the Meeting over various issues, from support for same gender unions to how to preserve the historical integrity of our meeting room. . . . Many new or established in the Meeting community often say they have a sense of the deepness of the gathered silence. The content and quality of spoken ministry is of a high

standard, and one respected member has called it ‘rich and deep.’ Meeting for Business is well attended. . . . The Meeting is especially pleased with the growing number of children who attend.” (2004)

Today, the Gunpowder Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends is a vibrant Quaker community that meets in its renovated historic Meetinghouse, built in 1821 near Sparks, Maryland, some twelve miles north of Baltimore. In May 2004, Gunpowder Meeting hosted a visit by the Friends Historical Association, which provided an opportunity for Marshall Sutton to research, assemble, and present this brief history of Gunpowder Monthly Meeting. In it, he traces the origins of the Meeting community from the late 17th century and through the years of robust growth and change in the 18th and 19th centuries. He chronicles the vision and faith of those who sustained the Meeting during the 20th century and made possible its continuing rebirth. We are grateful to Marshall for his many hours perusing old records including those archived at the Maryland Hall of Records and at Swarthmore College. In turn, Marshall has expressed his own appreciation for Gunpowder Friends who helped with additions or corrections to his text. Above all, we are grateful for the Light that has guided, sustained, and given life to this Meeting.

EPILOGUE (2nd Edition):

Marshall O. Sutton, author of this history, died Nov 17, 2017 at the age of 99. He had witnessed and contributed to Gunpowder Meeting’s sustained revival, its spiritual and personal hospitality, its intentional ministries to its own members and attenders, and the resulting support for individuals’ leadings both contemplative and active. Marshall’s life was one of curiosity, spiritual depth, and service, as described more detail in the Memorial Minute that is part of Gunpowder Meeting’s permanent records. Marshall was the first director of Catoctin Quaker camp, and – as part of his conscientious objector status prior to and during WWII – one of only 40 participants in a landmark study (Minnesota Starvation Experiment) that saved lives of war survivors recovering from starvation, an experience that simultaneously transformed Marshall’s own life. Typical of Gunpowder’s elders, Marshall “leaned in” to social changes wrought by the divine Light of continuing revelation, including the Meeting’s decision to support same-gender marriages (a discernment left in suspense in 1st Edition). Three weeks before his death, his body failing, Marshall observed, *“God is the very presence of life. ... it’s such a pleasure to be in the world, and feel the joy of being present in the world.”* Asked if he had any message to convey to Friends at Gunpowder Meeting, he offered, *“Be attentive to going to Meeting and preparing yourself for Meeting.”* Then he added, *“I miss being out on the porch [where Meetings occur in summer]. I miss watching the birds fly around.”*



ERRATA: Minor corrections (at Marshall’s request) and additions (due to a newfound minute book from the early 20th century) were made in April 2018 by Alan and Amy Schmaljohn, Gunpowder Friends who had assisted Marshall with the 1st Edition. Details of changes will be found as lengthier errata in the electronic version of this history on the Gunpowder Meeting web site.

ERRATA (2nd Edition), Long Version

A minute book including Gunpowder records from 1921 until 1940, and again from 1957 until 1958 was found in possession of the Jack Matthews estate and returned to the Meeting. Descriptions of Meeting activities from these time periods have been added to the history, as Marshall did not have access to these records when he wrote and published the 1st Edition.

The 1st Edition reported the fire and rebuild as occurring in 1886 instead of 1866. The 1886 date appears in some modern narratives, but Marshall subsequently discovered the 1866 date to be correct from perusal of original Meeting minutes held at Swarthmore College.

In 1st Ed., placement of the 1821 Meetinghouse was attributed in part to its proximity to the railroad stop at Sparks; Marshall asked this be deleted as an apocryphal story.

Marshall requested the Jack Matthews (not Don as originally named) be included with the families who attended and revived the Meeting. Don was important as a financial supporter, including in the rebuilding of burial ground wall.

Corrections and additions to 2nd Edition were made by Alan and Amy Schmaljohn, Gunpowder Friends who assisted Marshall with the 1st Edition.

A future revision will include more stories from the latter half of the 20th century, as these pass from memory to history.