

## The Society of Friends in

At the beginning of the American Revolution, the Society of Friends was the fourth largest religious denomination in European settlements in North America (behind the Congregationalists, Anglicans, and Presbyterians). The fifth most numerous denomination, the Baptists, were on the rise and would become the largest denomination by the end of the century.

The structure of the Society of Friends was set by 1750 and did not change materially until the divisions in the middle of the following century. Quakers in North America were organized into six geographical areas called Yearly Meetings. Each yearly meeting had its own three-part organization: the men's meetings, women's meetings, and the select meetings (for ministers & elders). Each part of the organization was subdivided into Quarterly Meetings, which were also subdivided into Monthly Meetings. Most Monthly Meetings had several Preparative Meetings. A preparative meeting contained at least one "established" meeting and possibly one or more "indulged" or "allowed" meetings (which had oversight committees).

The organization of the worship space was being re-thought as the Revolution took place. The earlier meetings in North America followed one of two English styles of worship. These two earlier arrangements were being laid aside by a new approach to worship in the mid 1700s. The facing benches, at that time the seating for ministers, elders, and clerks, gradually were extended from wall to wall, and up to one third of those gathered sat there. The earlier pattern of men and women sitting on either side of a central aisle continued, but by the mid-1700s, a frame partition was installed in this aisle. The partition included moveable panels (called shutters) that would be opened for worship and closed for business.

The largest YM in terms of membership was Philadelphia. The earliest meetings along the Delaware River were less than a century old at the time. New meetings were being established to the northwest in north central Pennsylvania

and further west and southwest. Western QM encompassed meetings in southern Chester County, southern Lancaster County, and the new meetings being established at Warrington, Fairbax, and Hopewell. The extension of Western QM into Virginia gave PYM an unwieldy shape, as the meetings in Virginia were located on the west side of Maryland YM (which was renamed Baltimore YM in 1790).

The YM experiencing the greatest growth at the time was North Carolina. Some of its earliest meetings in the northeast part of the colony were already a century old, having been opened in 1672. A large-scale migration, resulted in the opening of large QMs in the Piedmont of NC. In addition to the dense settlements here, isolated meetings were being established throughout the colony and extending into South Carolina and to the meeting at Wrightsborough, Georgia. NCYM was probably the second largest YM in terms of membership but had the least density of all YMs at the time. Core Sound MM along the coast was one of a very few Friends meetings that had not established a women's meeting as the century entered its fourth quarter.

Maryland YM was located within the limits of the colony of Maryland, with meetings on both sides of the Chesapeake. In 1790, the boundary between Maryland and Philadelphia YMs was changed; the eastern shore meetings were transferred to Philadelphia YM in exchange for PYM's western meetings.

The movement to banish slavery from the Society of Friends was well under way by 1775. The initial agitations by Benjamin Lay and John Woolman had started the process, raising awareness of the wrongness of owning another human being. Philadelphia YM discussed the matter several times, finally approving a minute banning members from owning slaves in 1776. The process was slower in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina YMs where slaveholding was more prevalent among the members, but those three YMs approved minutes abolishing slavery within a decade.

## North America in 1775

