

North American Quakers

The landscape of North American Quakerism changed noticeably between 1775 and 1812. Like others, Quakers participated in the settling of new areas away from the Atlantic seaboard.

The most dramatic migration of Friends during these years drained anti-slavery Friends from North Carolina and Virginia YMs and into the Northwest Territory, where slavery was banned from the outset. Although a handful of Friends had moved prior to the settlement at Concord, Ohio, the establishment of that meeting represented the initial step of the migration. Thereafter, the entirety of Bush River QM (the Friends in South Carolina and Georgia, part of North Carolina YM) moved to Ohio except for a small remnant left at Bush River. One MM in South Carolina moved as a group and continued to use its old minute book when it settled in southwestern Ohio. Many meetings throughout North Carolina and Virginia were depleted and then laid down by the emigration to the Northwest. Both YMs were greatly reduced in size, and during the following generation, Virginia YM was laid down and attached to Baltimore YM.

The five new QMs that had been established by Baltimore YM were created mostly from migrations. As shown on the map, establishing these QMs had the effect of extending Baltimore YM westward to Indianapolis. These QMs were all large bodies that rivalled the size of QMs in the more established YMs and were in fact larger than Virginia YM. The large concentration of Friends in the area and their great distance from Baltimore (where YM was held) were the two great factors that led to the decision to establish a new YM to include the five QMs.

In the years following the American Revolution, many Friends who did not support the new federal government settled in British-controlled Canada, mostly around Lake Ontario. These meetings were originally part of Philadelphia YM. In 1808, Philadelphia YM organized Canada Half-Yearly Meeting that encompassed three MMs in Canada, and in 1810 it transferred these meetings to New York YM.

New York YM was experiencing its own internal migrations in addition to the acquisition of Canadian Friends. New meetings were established up the Hudson River valley and also westward through the center of upstate New York. By 1812, this migration had almost reached the nascent settlement of Buffalo. The meetings in western NY were located in the area that was soon to become the "burnt over" district, where a remarkable ferment of religious and social ideas were brought forth in the next generation.

Rhode Island YM was expanding to the north. The YM, renamed New England YM in the next generation, opened new meetings in New Hampshire and Maine in the very late 1700s and early 1800s. Several meetings in New England allowed tombstones, a local peculiarity that was quite rare among Quakers in North America. Rhode Island YM was held in the meeting house in Newport, Rhode Island; although it was later enlarged, the building was restored in the late 20th century to its appearance around 1800.

The six YMs in North America had a nearly identical organization. Each had three parallel structures: the men's YM, the women's YM, and the YM for Ministers & Elders. Each of these was subdivided into QMs, and each QM was then subdivided into MMs and PMs. The men's YMs appointed a Meeting for Sufferings that collected accounts of the sufferings of Friends, published materials, and acted on behalf of the YM when the larger body was not in session.

The yearly meeting of Ministers & Elders (also called the "select" YM) was the successor body to the London YM Second Day Morning Meeting. At YM time, these meetings discussed discernment of leadings to speak and travel, annually providing advice on spiritual topics that continues to be relevant today. In the early 1700s, the select YMs began to establish select QMs so that the important discussions could be held on a more local level. Around the time of the Revolution, local select meetings were being opened, but objections were often raised to the establishment of local select PMs.

in 1812

