

The Wilburite World

The Society of Friends fractured in the mid-19th century into three great traditions: the Hicksites, Gurneyites, and Wilburites. These three groups survive in modified form to this day, although Ohio YM is the only surviving Wilburite body.

The initial division began in Philadelphia YM in 1827 and ending in 1830. The yearly meetings that divided were Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Ohio, and Indiana. The small number of Hicksites in New England were attached to New York YM (H). Virginia and North Carolina YMs were solidly Orthodox.

Tensions within the Orthodox emerged in the 1830s. In England, Isaac Crewdson published his divisive book *The Beacon to the Society of Friends*, and in the mid-1830s most of his supporters left Quakerism. The "moderates" in England came under the influence of Joseph John Gurney, a prolific writer who would sometimes use his vast economic resources to publish his books without waiting for approval through the normal Quaker channels. Concern with the writings of Gurney, particularly passages that contradicted the writings of early Friends, was being raised across North America by the time of Gurney's visit in 1837. Soon thereafter, John Wilbur wrote an anonymous book that compared some of Gurney's passages with scriptures and the writings of Fox, Barclay, and 17th century Friends. When the information was leaked that Wilbur had written the book, Gurney's supporters in New England took the highly irregular step of re-organizing the MMs in southern Rhode Island and having him disowned.

Wilbur's supporters appealed his disownment, which resulted in a division of the local QM. When New England YM met, the Wilburites and Gurneyites both sent representatives. The YM appointed a committee to consider the situation and then adjourned for the session. Thomas B. Gould, a solid Friend who had challenged Gurney during his 1837 visit, recognized that the Gurneyites planned to re-appoint the men's YM Clerk, a strong supporter of Gurney. He thus asked for supporters of Wilbur to keep their seats

when the Gurneyites left. With this move, New England YM began the process of dividing.

The second Wilburite body to emerge was New York YM. The Wilburites were forced out of Scipio QM in 1847, and in 1851 Wilburites in Vermont joined them. They held New York YM (W) for the first time in 1853.

The major year of the Wilbur-Gurney troubles was 1854. After the division in Ohio YM, Wilburite groups were established in Baltimore YM and Salem QM (Iowa). Philadelphia YM recognized both New England and Ohio YMs, but Ohio did not officially recognize New England at this time. With the exceptions of Ohio and Philadelphia, the Wilburite bodies were very small groups, and they entered into correspondence with each other, forming the Primitive branch of Friends (a subset of the Wilburites).

In 1860, some Primitive-leaning Friends in Philadelphia YM met at Fallsington to consider their situation. After those who wanted to stay in PYM left, the remnant formed Fallsington General Meeting and entered into correspondence with the other Primitive Friends. In 1862, Primitive Friends in Ohio formed their own GM.

Sadly, the world of Primitive Friends fractured into three camps. An unnecessary division took place in New York YM in 1859 over how to handle a passage in the journal of Joseph Hoag, then being published. The division resulted in the Otisite" and "Kingite" factions. The Otis body only retained a meeting at Poplar Ridge, and the remainder of the YM became "Kingites." Divisions took place in Iowa and New England, and in all cases the Kingites were the larger body. Most Iowa Kingites joined the new meetings set up by Ohio YM. In 1867, Ohio GM decided not to accept the epistle from Fallsington, which over time resulted in a three-way division. The main body of OGM became an independent Primitive body, and a meeting of New York Primitives joined them in the early 1870s. These needless subdivisions embarrassed Ohio and Philadelphia Friends.

1840 to 1875

