

THE APPONEGANSETT

MEETING HOUSES

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OLD DARTMOUTH HISTORICAL SKETCHES

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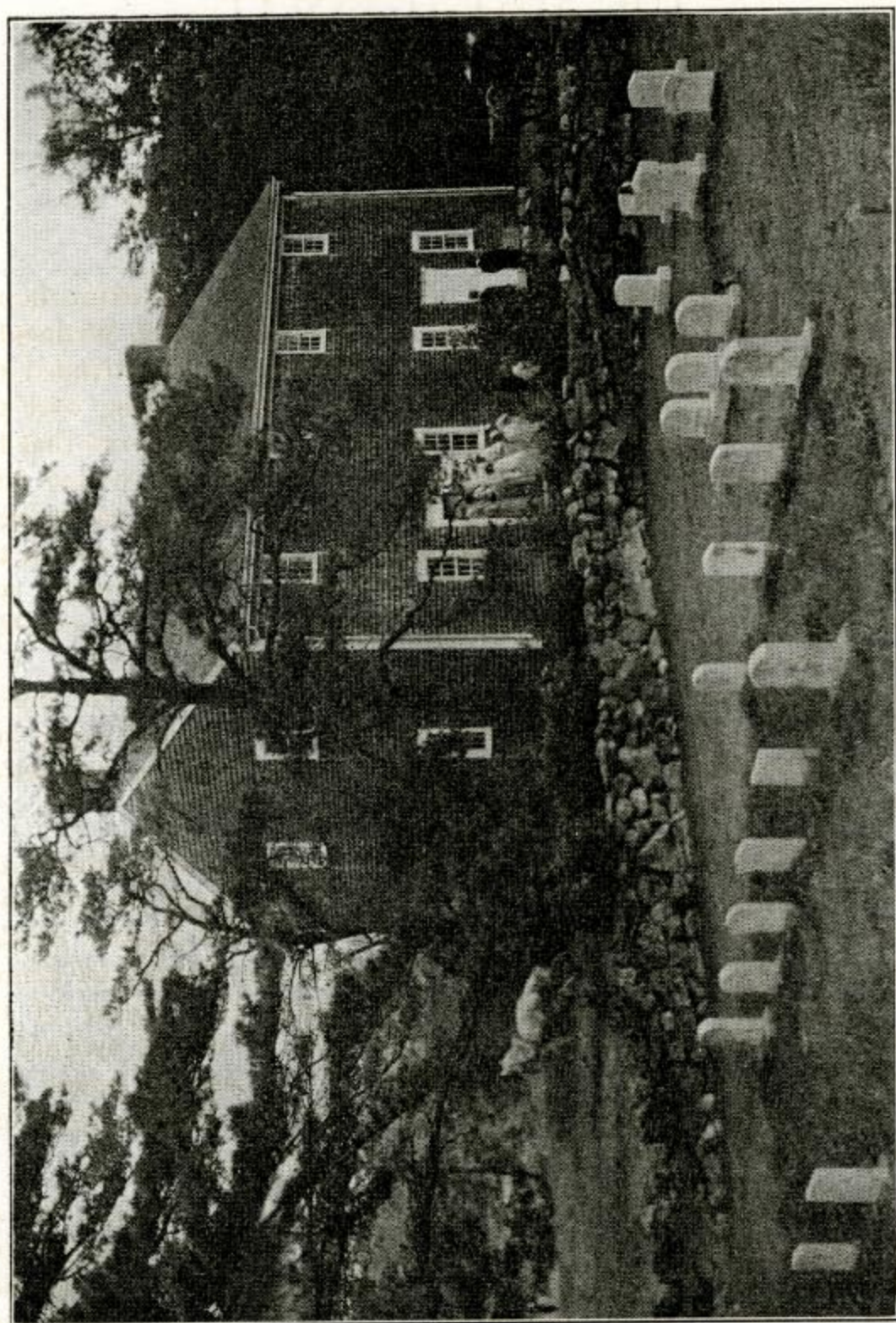


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THE APPONEGANSETT FRIENDS MEETING HOUSES AND SOME INTIMATE ASSOCIATIONS

In the appropriate setting of the Apponegansett Meeting house, the Old Dartmouth Historical Society held its annual outing, Wednesday afternoon, July 29, 1931. About two hundred people attended the affair. The early arrivals spent pleasant moments looking over the interesting old building and the burying ground and meadows that lay surrounding, in the sunshine. These warm meadows are dotted with the simple sober gravestones of buried Friends, and they lie in an irregular order on the knolls and slopes that make up the field between the old stone walls as far down as the woods below. One woman was overheard telling some of her friends of some man who had placed a stone on his wife's grave which the Quakers thought too worldly. The widower, however, rather than argue, removed the stone and took it home where he placed it in his fireplace. He later married again and his second wife had the dubious pleasure of looking at the first wife's gravestone in its unique resting place.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and no one could have missed the contrast between the atmosphere of the old meeting house and the wide meadows that lay hot under the sun out where the breezes bustled through the woods and the elms that bent and swayed tall and plume-like around inside the stone wall. All during the reading of the paper on Quaker ways by Thomas A. Tripp the breezes swished in through the doors into the calm shadows of the meeting house. At one time men came with a hayrick and took away the hay that had been piled in sweet smelling rows in the sun-baked field.

Inside the meeting house, things were different. The place had an air of the past that was unmistakable. There were the long rows of hard wooden benches, with three rows facing the others, and at each end of the house was an open fire-place. Above, on the second floor there were seats that rose in tiers like galleries. Originally there was no ceiling over the center part of the meeting house so that the people in the gallery could look down at the meeting. Of late, however, a board

ceiling has been put in to keep the heat down when the building is used in winter. The raised "shutters" so called, between the women's side and the men's, which were lowered when the business meetings were held are of beautiful cedar, of fine graining, with perfectly patterned dark blotches of knots and a smooth satiny finish.

Zephaniah W. Pease, president of the society, opened the meeting with remarks of thanks to the clerk of the Apponegansett Monthly Meeting for the loan of the building to the Historical society. Mr. Tripp said that Mr. Pease showed a lack of knowledge of speaking customs in Quaker meeting by standing on the women's side of the house. Mr. Pease told of a woman who attended a public reception at the White House and to commend herself to the attention of the President she said "Mr. President I was born a Quaker." "Well," said the President "you haven't been any worse for that, have you?" Mr. Pease said this community had been no worse, certainly for the influence of the Friends who contributed demeanour to the old town, influenced architecture and made its homes seats of content while its merchants upheld a lofty standard of commercial honor in the counting houses. He told of the practice of the merchants to leave their work on the Fifth day morning each week and go to meeting for an hour. Sometimes there was a word of prayer or the recital of a Scripture text. And sometimes there was no sound, but the song of a bird such as was heard this afternoon, or the clatter of a passing vehicle. Yet even the Quakers were not exempt from the world's intrusion. A merchant left his counting room where a problem had arisen concerning the fitting of a ship. On returning the discussion was renewed and settled. "I was thinking about that in meeting this morning," he said. The meeting houses and unadorned headstones indicated the rigid order of discipline. The Friend cared for no memorial. He preferred the shaft should remain in the stone. The tranquility of the meeting house led one to feel, in the words of the Friends marriage ritual, "In the presence of the Lord."

Mr. Pease closed his address by introducing Thomas A. Tripp of Fairhaven who read a paper which he had prepared, entitled "Old Apponegansett Meeting-Houses, and Some Intimate Associations." Mr. Tripp's paper met with a enthusiastic approval from the members of the society, who responded often to the witty touches with which he had seasoned the following address.

"We are gathered today in the midst of a locality possessing richer items of historical interests than most sections of New England. Its

area was deeded for minor considerations by two Indian sachems with the approval of King Philip himself in 1652. We may conceive that this purchase made by Wm. Bradford of the Plymouth Colony and his 33 associates was something of an event for those days, and even now, just now, the purchase of an equal area would warrant us in considering that the participants in the investment had unbounded faith in Real Estate. The news of this Dartmouth purchase filtered through to the Friends communities in Rhode Island which was thought too crowded according to the ideas of that day and reached also to Sandwich where the persecutions of the Friends in this first Quaker settlement was particularly severe, so that for the reasons stated families of Friends from these two localities moved into this new town of Dartmouth and mostly to this immediate locality. Dartmouth corporate existence began in 1664 — its 1st town meeting held in 1674. We must believe that many of the men and women who settled here were substantial people, some of them to make iron from the bog ores near by, others to till the land on the banks of the peaceful Paskamansett and most of them to leave the impress of their character and enterprise on the new and rapidly developing interests of this important locality and upon the new and developing religious sect which bought this meeting place and Dartmouth Monthly Meeting into being. At this time so far removed from the "spirit of that early day so pure and strong and true" so far removed from those who manifested such intense interest in and devotion to the principles of truth and the guidance of the inner light is it too much to say that we gather today in a holy place sanctified as it has been by the mourning for loved ones who lie buried in yonder field sanctified by the joys of unnumbered weddings and by the prayers of those saints in Israel who uttered the truth as God gave them to see the truth. Lacking the unfailing memory and the painstaking ability for research of a former member of this society, Mr. Henry B. Worth, I am somewhat handicapped in my efforts to present this afternoon an interesting array of facts and to recount in his charming way some of the fascinating episodes connected with the church life of the early worshipers here and their establishment of this meeting house and its predecessor and the meetings held therein. From a long and somewhat intimate association I am not out of touch with the more recent habits and customs of the good order of Friends and have heard from my Grandparents something of the doings, the regulations, and the rules of discipline which were practiced in the prosperous years of the society in Southeastern Massachusetts. I early learned about the dates on which the meetings were held—one to be on the 4th 5th day of the month — another on the 4th day before the 3rd 5th day to avoid conflict. My Grandfather surprised my youthful mind with his erudition

regarding dates of meetings and particularly with the statement that the Long Plain Preparative meeting could not come before the 14th nor after the 20th but might happen on either of these dates or any one between. In these days of creature comforts, of inventions for recreation, for labor saving, for transportation by land and sea and air it is difficult to visualize and enter into the stern and difficult life of the Quaker pioneers and to realize that their hardships were continuous, broken only by that dearly prized privilege of attendance at First day, —midweek, and monthly meetings. The records do not inform us when and where the Quakers of Dartmouth first gathered for a meeting, we do know that John Burneyear travelled through the woods from Sandwich to Ponigansit in the fall of 1665 and "that truth had a good reception". In the absence of records we may conclude that persecution by the authorities here was not as severe and continuous as at Sandwich a few years previously. Maybe the Friends along the Paskamansett were a much larger proportion of the community or maybe the worldly authorities had learned that persecution tended to augment the organization and like the fabled Hydra two heads appeared in place of one removed and there was no local Hercules to destroy the vital spark and thus crush the spirit of devoted determined and zealous souls.

We must assume that the Friends colony had been quite rapidly augmented from the nearby communities of Newport and Portsmouth where there was liberty in religion and from Sandwich where the "tumultuous carriage" of Friends had so incensed the officers of church and state.

The meetings evidently were getting too large for private homes, even the spacious house of Peleg Slocum, for on 11 mo., 6th, 1698 several members of the society met at the home of John Lapham and decided to erect a meeting house as appears by the following agreement, viz: "At a man's meeting in the town of Dartmouth on the 6th day of the 11th month 1698 at the house of John Lapham, We underwritten, Peleg Slocum, Jacob Mott, Abraham Tucker and John Tucker, the day and year above written undertake to build a meeting house for the people of God in scorn called Quakers 35 foot long, 30 foot wide and 14 foot studds. To worship and serve the true and living God in accordance as they are persuaded in continence they ought to do and for no other use, interest or purpose but as aforesaid." In witness hereto we subscribe our names with our own hands and will contribute as follows. John Tucker 10£, Peleg Slocum 15£, John Lapham 05£ and 9 others makings a total contribution of 63£ and 12s, with no doubt other sums contributed by others at a later date. It seems to have been a custom of the day or at least of this 11, 6, 1698 to place a zero before

the figure of the subscription if the amount was less than ten lbs. sterling. Perhaps the raising of amounts in subscriptions or checks is not as modern as we assume.

The building committee if such was appointed was prompt in action for a minute of the monthly meeting held in Newport, to which Dartmouth Monthly Meeting belonged, states that "Dartmouth Friends having determined to build a meeting house and referred to this meeting where it shall be erected, Daniel Gould, Walter Clark, Jacob Mot are appointed to view the place and determine where it shall stand." This committee reported promptly, for at a men's meeting at Newport 1st mo., 10, 1699 the "Friends appointed to settle ye lands for building a meeting house at the request of Dartmouth Friends doth return for answer that it is done for general satisfaction."

Friends seemed to have been diligent in the business of building the house and thereby serving the Lord for it was finished as early as the sixth month 1699, two months earlier than specified in the agreement, for that eminent travelling Friend, Thos. Story mentions that with one Roger Gill he attended a meeting in that 1st meeting house on that date.

Things prospered at this house and in this meeting for in the records of a Rhode Island Quarterly Meeting in which Dartmouth was included, in 1700 John Lapham, a representative from Dartmouth appeared and gave an account that "ye truth prospers among Friends and things were well with Friends at Dartmouth." The 1st monthly meeting was held at Peleg Slocum's 4 mo., 26th., 1699 and was held regularly at his house until 4 mo., 21, 1703. It would be of interest to know why the monthly meetings continued at Peleg Slocum's nearly four years after the house was finished. This first house was enlarged under direction of a committee chosen 4 mo., 11, 1702. Again it was decided to enlarge it previous to the yearly meeting at Newport in 1727. Another addition was made in 1743, another proposed in 1765 but never carried out.

It seems to have been the custom for many visiting Friends and ministers who attended the yearly meeting in June at Newport to come to Apponegansett to attend the monthly meeting there held a few days later. It is doubtful if there were any fire places in the first house for in 1710 Wm. Soule was appointed to "procure a pot to make a fire in and coals to burn in it," the record states. Previous to 1860 there were no stoves and so from 1790, the date of the present house, fire places served for heating. The original cemetery six rods square was set apart

for that purpose 7 mo., 16, 1706 and a stone wall ordered to be built around it, a committee appointed to see that "Friends bury in order and that none be buried there but Friends and such as Friends allow of."

The building of a meeting house, the establishment of a monthly meeting all in the year 1699 seems to have been a fitting close of the century for Friends in these parts and were events which were to exert important influence upon this section of the commonwealth as did the monthly meetings at Sandwich and Pembroke which had been previously established. Geo. Fox was one of the outstanding men of his century, the founder of the Friends Society, endowed with spiritual insight and vision, as well as indomitable will and physical endurance and was called by Carlyle the greatest of the moderns. He looked heavenward from his earth and because of his undying faith and iron constitution endured unceasing hardship and prison often for conscience sake. He had with all his qualities a genius for organization. He recognized that in a system of detached independent meetings and general assemblies, Friends would not prosper, there must be not only stimulus of numbers but also the communion with the saints of other localities. Hence in addition to the local meetings of the midweek and First day there came into being through his devising the Preparative — Monthly — Quarterly — and Yearly meetings, the smaller body reporting to and acting under the supervising power of each superior body. This system was finely conceived and after more than two and one half centuries still persists without change except that the separate business meetings for women have ceased and both men and women together transact the business of the church. These sober minded Quakers continuously confronted by the daily tasks needed not only the stimulus of religion but also something additional to their neighborhood sociability. These Dartmouth people for instance needed the encouraging visions of their friends and relatives coming from the monthly meetings of Sandwich — Falmouth — Pembroke — Nantucket — and Newport to relieve the strain of the daily toil. There was need of the communion with the saints of other localities — need for cousin to meet cousin, perhaps a mother to meet son — a brother to meet sister or someone else's sister.

In my own recollection I have seen many carriages arrive at West Falmouth for the July Quarterly Meeting, the owners having driven from Westport, Dartmouth, New Bedford, Sandwich, Pembroke, Yarmouth and elsewhere, arriving usually on 4th day afternoon, going to the Quarterly Meeting the better part of 5th day and starting homeward on 6th day morning. While these were times for the refreshing of the

soul, the necessities of the inner man were not neglected — I can well remember that while the Preparative Meeting dinners were worthy of the occasion and those of the Monthly Meeting correspondingly bountiful those of the Quarterly Meeting were a thing apart. They responded to the preparation of a week, they climaxed a long anticipation in many a home and the minds of its guests, who rose mightily to the occasion. I recall many a participation but always at the second table. Within these walls and those of the first meeting house the clerks of the monthly meeting since 11 mo. 6, 1698 have kept and read continuous and faithful records of the business activities of the society — Births — Marriages — Deaths — admissions and disownments are recorded and available for present and future historians. Many of these records are unique in the light of the present viewpoint. Committees were frequently chosen to inspect into the lives and conversations of Friends for the following month or the following six mos. as the case might be.

1/27/1704 a committee chosen to go to John Fish and wife to labor further with them to show them their "shortness in speaking rash words to Josiah Merrihew." 4/6/1704 committee appointed to "hear the difference between two important members and end the same." Reported next month they ended it. 5/17/1704 a committee reported it had determined and ended a difference between two other important members. 6/21/1704 a busy day. Representatives chosen to the Quarterly and Yearly meetings, two couples seeking the marriage bonds and a committee including one of the above differing members appointed to labor with another friend to show him his error. 5/15/1705 The committee appointed to enquire into the lives and conversations of Friends made answer that "they find nothing but that things are pretty well." This committee was continued for further service. 1/18/1706 agreed "Friends should have a preparative meeting in order that many items might be settled rather than take the time of the monthly meeting." Said meeting to choose two or three weighty friends to present the necessary business to the Monthly meeting. Weighty members were few for the same seven or eight people served on all the committees for a long period. 3/16/1709 The Treas. ordered to pay 10s. to help defray Friend's passage to Nantucket—perhaps in Peleg Slocum's shallop. 6 mo., 1709 Treas. to pay 10s. for care of the meeting house one year — gradually increased to 35s. Also ordered to pay 12s. to the clerk for writing the minutes. It was worth it with quill pens. It is worth more than that to read them and I can testify that it is 12s. more than 'is' paid to a certain monthly meeting clerk today. 7/21/1709 Elizabeth — omitting the last name — daughter of Hezekiah and Mary

"hath walked disorderly in marriage with one of the world, contrary to the good order of truth established amongst us and Friends being clear of her this meeting makes choice of John Tucker and another to draw up a paper of condemnation concerning her and bring it to the next monthly meeting." At the next monthly meeting the committee in the case of Elizabeth who by the way married a Tripp did not report and was continued. The next month the committee reported but it "not being fully accomplished to the satisfaction of Friends the committee is still continued and two others are appointed and added to them for the full accomplishing the same." At an adjourned meeting the committee reported and the record is "the meeting has cause to refer it to the next monthly meeting before it goes forth in public." Next month the final report, "We have no unity with such marriages nor with Elizabeth in her marrying out of the good order of truth." In view of the difficulty in getting a condemnatory report we must conclude that Elizabeth was a very pretty and popular girl and the young man Tripp a popular and fortunate bridegroom. 7/19/1715 Three young men, sons of important and weighty members were reported to have walked disorderly, a committee was chosen to report "how they find things." These young men, if they did walk disorderly, were not a new genus for inscriptions on the stones of Egypt 4000 years ago reveal that children do not obey their parents and the young people are very wayward. The Dartmouth committees certainly had an active career for 85% of the business of the monthly meeting for 150 years was in connection with the marriages of the young people according to truth and the condemnatory proceedings concerning those who "married out". 1/19/1715 "It being proposed by some friends to this meeting whether it be agreeable to truth to purchase and keep slaves which is referred to the Quarterly meeting." This question of slavery was a source of serious contention especially among Friends of South County, R. I., until it was definitely settled a few years later. I do not make allusion to these ancient records with any thought of criticism or ridicule but quite the opposite. I desire to impress upon us the deep seated sincerity of these earlier people and their earnest efforts to keep the society up to its highest standards and if any will read even a small portion of those ancient records they will appreciate the intensity of interest manifested in these monthly proceedings. It seems reflected even in the very paper and ink and hand writing of those who wrote but for the first one hundred and fifty years did not sign. It is surprising that no mention was made of those important traveling ministers who visited the meetings nor of the great number of people sometimes in attendance. 2/17/1727 a committee appointed to purchase land in Acushnet for a meeting house. This was

done and the house built that year. The 2nd house now stands on the same spot at parting ways. In December, 1762 all Friends east of the Acushnet River were set off from Dartmouth to be members of Sandwich Quarterly Meeting. In Sept., 1787 Dartmouth Meeting concluded to inform the Quarterly Meeting that the house is old and out of repair and request advice regard building a new one or repair this and a committee was appointed to confer with the Quarterly Meeting. November, 1787, the committee reported some obstruction. April, 1788 a committee appointed for "planning and therein regulating the size of the house, collecting material, sitting, erecting, building and finishing the house and report from time to time." April, 1790 the committee instructed to take the old meeting house down and decide at which of the private houses the mid week and First Day meetings were to be held and to hold the next monthly meeting at Newtown, (Smith's Mills) 5/17/1790. The next at New Bedford, 6/21/1790, the 1st monthly meeting ever held there, the next two at New Bedford. The next at Newtown, 9/20/1790. The next at New Bedford 10/18/1790 at which time it was concluded to hold the next meeting in this new meeting house on 11/15/1790. Wm. Rotch, Jr., was clerk for that day at New Bedford the last time that the Dartmouth monthly meeting was held there. 10/15/1792 a committee of Sandwich Quarterly meeting reported it wise to set off New Bedford particular meeting as a monthly meeting and agree with Dartmouth Friends as to boundary lines and other necessary details, the monthly meetings to be held in New Bedford on 3rd day after the 3rd 2nd day in each month, which being interpreted is the Tuesday after the 3rd Monday. At this same time the Friends of Long Plain, Rochester, Acushnet and Fairhaven, 173 in number, were detached from Sandwich Monthly Meeting and added to the 208 in New Bedford making a total membership for New Bedford Monthly Meeting in 1793 of 381.

Those who may 100 years hence examine the monthly records of New England Friends may not find the wording in accord with the phraseology of 2031 and they certainly will not find them suffused and burdened with the requests of young men and maidens seeking the sanction of the meeting to marry. It is foolish perhaps to speculate financially or in this instance historically but one cannot help wondering at least, what might have happened in and to the society if 200 years ago the discipline had been changed and the records had been devoid of disownments for marrying out so called. Some of the finest men and women of the society were deported as it were for doing the finest thing they ever did, and so instead of gaining many

times a most valued convert one equally valuable was lost as well as charming families which mostly resulted in those days. The minds and rules of those earlier worthies lacked flexibility. There was needed the vision, the genius, the wisdom of a Fox to guide. He might in his reading of the early chapters of Deuteronomy discovered some significance in the frequent statements regarding Israel's journeyings — "Then we turned"—the next chapter "then we turned"—and further "we turned." Fox might have reflected upon the inflexible Quaker rules and noted that because they turned these wandering tribes of Israel reached the promised land. Reading these ancient records and looking down the long vista of the years we can see as in a vision.

"The Quaker of the older time,
So calm and firm and true,
Unspotted by its wrong and crime,
He walked the dark earth through,
The lust of power, the love of gain,
The thousand lures of sin ,
Around him had no power to stain
The purity within."

It would be possible to recount many items of personal interest from the journals of conspicuous traveling Friends. Perhaps the following is typical from the journal of John Woolman, that man of God of whom Whittier might have said as he did of Geo. Whitehead.

"He hugged the closer his little store
Of faith and silently prayed for more
And vague of creed and barren of rite
But holding as in his master's sight
Act and thought to the inner light
The round of his simple duties walked
And strove to live as the others talked."

Woolman, attending some meeting here, states "there arose some heat in the minds of the parties and one valued Friend got off his watch." In 1746 he visited R. I., Dartmouth and Sandwich meetings and spent a week in Nantucket, an alluring field in the summer. In 1760 he was at Newtown (Smith Mills), Cushnet, Long Plain, Rochester and Dartmouth and from here sailed to Nantucket, reached Tarpaulin cove the 1st night—"the next day the wind was small but reached within four miles of Nantucket harbor," on returning visited Sandwich Quarterly Meeting—this sounds natural—some of us attended one on the 11th Inst. Of

unusual interest and surprise is the large number in the society hereabout in the earlier 1700's. The monthly meeting here following the June meeting so called in Newport was a season for large attendance. In 1727 Samuel Bownas reports a very large meeting continuing for three days. 1737 Thos. Chawckley attended a large meeting and mentions that many hundreds had been added to the church since his first visit. In 1758 Wm. Reckett, a visiting minister, estimated 800 people gathered for the meeting — John Griffith, another public Friend, when here in 1766 estimated there were 2000 people here at one time. Joseph Edgerton from Ohio states there were nearly 1000 people at the monthly meeting. These early Friends, who for conscience sake endured the hardships of travel received inspiration for further service as they viewed the members being added to the church. These walls have echoed with words from gifted tongues speaking as the inner light directed. There has been a long galaxy of noted servants of the Prince of peace. Some of the men and women within our recollection hold our interest. Eli and Sibyl Jones, those pioneers in foreign mission work were here. First the information was spread — the Quaker term for for broadcasting — that Sibyl and Eli were coming — in later years as Eli's gift increased word went out that Eli and Sibyl would be present. Both were saints in Israel. Rachael Howland of New Bedford, of blessed memory, equally at home driving a matched pair from her summer home on the Point Road or preaching with grace of manner and exquisite charm of voice the gospel of the Master, dignified the meeting here with her presence and service. Wm. Witherall of Canada the tutor of Jas. J. Hill of R. R. fame and David P. Updigraff of Ohio who adored fine horses which could step, each had language and gesture which still linger in memory. Elizabeth Comstock, a noted and earnest minister from England, as well as Caroline Talbot of England with refinement of voice and presence long to be remembered, preached here. Isaac R. Gifford and Phebe Rushmore, his wife, were conspicuous members of this monthly meeting. Phebe possessed the germ of determination and longevity and preached an able sermon at Newport yearly meeting in her 100th year. We would not omit Gertrude Cartland, a cousin of Whittier who, when she removed her plain bonnet and arose to preach, represented the poetry of motion. Little has been said of this meeting house as a structure. There is little to be said. It has long served its purpose in dignity. It is still serving it unadorned. It has housed silent worshipers and gifted speakers since 1790. This house I present for your inspection and as Webster said of Massachusetts in a famous speech, "there she stands." Of this house and its purpose I will let Whittier speak.

"Where farmer folk in silence meet
I turn my bell unsummoned feet,
And so I find it well to come,
For deeper rest to this still room.
For here the habit of the soul
Feels less the outer world's control
The strength of mutual purpose pleads
More earnestly our common needs
And from the silence multiplied
By these still forms on either side
The world that time and sense have known
Falls off and leaves us God alone."
Here this house still stands
"Near Paskamansett's winding stream
By forests circled round,
An old time house of worship
By an ancient burial ground.
The old house gone, the new now old
Its wood with age is stained
Bench post and ceiling all one hue
And thus have long remained."

Here it stands nearby the highway of the passing throngs, the gray and simple dignity a mute monument to the generations who worshipped here. Its interior, more seldom seen, has been a silent and continuing witness to fervent prayers, praises and aspirations, the joys and sorrows of a sincere and earnest people. May these silent walls charged as they have been with the accumulated waves of pious words, in some mysterious way as yet unknown give forth a mysterious current of inspiration to help another Jones to go forth and lead a backward people from darkness into light — to inspire another Bradford to reveal with artistic vision the glories of the Arctic and bring out of some humble home another Hoover to lead this glorious nation.