



UWCHLAN MEETING HOUSE

Its Story

Francis G. Brown

To speak about Uwchlan Meeting House -- this historic building where we are gathered this afternoon -- is like coming home to me. It is the ancestral home of our Friends Meeting in Downingtown. In fact, each month when we hold our business meeting, we begin with the phrase, "*At Uwchlan Monthly Meeting of Friends held at Downingtown.*" The Monthly Meeting had always met here at Uwchlan but by 1900, other than Downingtown, the Preparative Meetings which made up the Monthly Meeting -- East Nantmeal, Pikeland and Uwchlan itself -- had died out which meant that the Monthly Meeting entity devolved on us in Downingtown.

At the outset, I would like to express appreciation on behalf of our Meeting -- indeed, on behalf of the entire community -- for the way the Uwchlan Conservation Trust and, prior to that, the Women's Community Club have cared for and restored this beautiful old Meeting House. When in its prime, it functioned as a kind of community center. In large measure you are continuing it in that role.

Uwchlan Meeting was at its height throughout the 1700s and well into the 1800s. It became a large and important Meeting which covered a wide geographical area. Primarily, of course, it was a place of worship -- with meeting held in midweek as well as on "First-day" (Sunday). But many were the marriages held here and, of course, many also the funerals -- evidenced by the large adjoining graveyard.

To understand a Quaker Meeting House, it is important to understand something of the Quaker manner of worship and some of their practices. The plainness of this room -- its unpainted benches and paneling, its lack of stained windows -- was to avoid outward distraction so as to encourage the inward search for divine guidance -- to hear the "still, small voice." This search is held on the basis of silence which requires no professional leadership, no order of service, no outward sacraments -- not even an offering. The silence can be broken by anyone who feels spiritually led to share a message or prayer. When the business of the Meeting is taken up once a month (which gives the term, "Monthly Meeting") -- such matters as property upkeep, finances, membership, the social testimonies -- such business is to be considered in the spirit of worship. Quaker decision-making has always been by the "sense of the meeting" rather than by voting which, they feel, can at times be divisive.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

In essence, it was this worship and these practices which constituted the life and history of this Meeting House. But when we come to specifics, as with much of history, there are many gaps in our knowledge. Certainly this is true here. What we do know comes, primarily, from the minutes of this Meeting as well as from the minutes of Quaker bodies connected with it. But there are numerous other sources of our information.

Always the first place to turn for any local history is Futhey and (Gilbert) Cope's classic *History of Chester County*. In giving the story of Uwchlan, not only does Gilbert Cope draw on minutes but on other sources of information, such as deed transfers, as well. And, always an excellent source of local history, the research library of the Chester County Historical Society, is helpful, especially for its news clippings and old photos.

Two other sources of information which have been very useful to me as I have prepared this paper come right out of this immediate community. Susannah Wilson Brody has written *A History of Uwchlan Township, 1682-1782*, which was published in 1983. While hers is a wider focus, she provides much useful background information. James Edward Matthews, a native son, produced in 1970 a well researched paper on the history of this Meeting House. Aided by numerous photos, he highlights some physical features of the building about which opinions have varied. I will dwell on a few of these later on.

"UWCHLAN"

Before we begin, however, I want to discuss this word, "Uwchlan." As I have said, I have lived with it all my life. It's a lovely word. The only problem is that no one is sure just how it should be pronounced or how it should be spelled! Indeed, over the years there have many spellings.

Even so, what this word tells us is that this Meeting House and this Township were Welsh in origin. It's an interesting story, familiar to most of us. Quakerism was born in England in the mid-1600s. William Penn was an early convert as were many persons in Wales, where the movement quickly spread. When Penn acquired the vast lands in America in payment for money the king owed his father, Admiral Sir William Penn (for whom "Pennsylvania" was named), some of these Welsh Quakers – social peers of Penn – approached him to buy land in his new province. They wanted thousands of acres northwest of Philadelphia set aside on which they could establish a "barony" which came to be referred to as the "Welsh Tract." Towns on the Main Line with names like Narberth, Bryn Mawr and Berwyn reflect this plan. But it failed to materialize. While still in Wales, these men purchased large tracts of land but most of these were never located. As a result, when these families later arrived, the tracts had already been taken up. They were forced to locate westward. The Thomas family – a family so central to the life of this Meeting – is a case in point. They had come from "Whitford Garne" in Wales, but because of the confusion they were forced to settle in "*The gloomy dale then and since called the Great Valley.*" Most other families went north and took up land here in Uwchlan.

There were Welsh Baptists and Welsh Presbyterians who came as well, but the Quakers were by far the larger group. These people brought their language with them. So it is, we think, that they called this area, "Uwchlan," which in Welsh means, "high land above a valley."

INDIAN COUNTRY

This had been Indian country. Sue Brody points out that many of the roads in the Township had been Indian paths. The main one of these was called the Allegheny Path (present Route #100) which connected the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia with the Allegheny in Pittsburgh. Today Village Avenue marks its trail through Lionville. Here numerous other roads, also former Indian paths, branched off -- the road west to Dowlin's Forge, the "George Thomas" road (now Whitford Road) south to the Valley, and present Route #113 which runs from Downingtown, through the village and on north to Phoenixville. Here, at the juncture of these paths, Uwchlan Meeting House was built and its burial ground laid out. It was a prime location as it remains today in spite of the new road configurations and development. Indeed, according to Sue Brody, the village was first known as "Quaker Meeting," a name which lasted until 1826 when the first post office was established. At that point the name was changed to "Lionville," derived from the "Red Lion Inn," a building still standing across the road from the Meeting House.

CHRONOLOGY OF HISTORY

With this as background let me briefly present a chronology of the main events in the life of Uwchlan Meeting and thus of the Meeting House itself:

- ♦ 1712 A group of Quakers, "*in a place called Youchland,*" (I love that!) asked permission of Chester Monthly Meeting to set up a meeting for worship to be held in the home of John Cadwallader.
- ♦ 1714 Permission granted, not only to hold worship but for it to be a Preparative Meeting as well.
- ♦ 1716 John Cadwallader gave "*a piece of ground for a burying place, and to set a meeting house on, for ye use of ye people called Quakers.*"
- ♦ 1716 Then, or shortly thereafter, a first Meeting House, doubtless a log structure, was built. See below.
- ♦ 1737 John Cadwallader and his wife, Sarah, gave another acre of land to add to the burial ground. Some people think this was when the first Meeting House was built. See below.
- ♦ 1756 The present Meeting House was built, confirmed by the date stone in the gable of the west wall.

- ♦ 1763 Uwchlan Monthly Meeting established to be made up of the following Preparative Meetings: East Nantmeal, Pikeland, Uwchlan and Downingtown (when it was later set up in 1811).
- ♦ 1771 The first section of the graveyard wall, the west side, built.
- ♦ 1778 The Meeting House taken over as a hospital for sick and wounded soldiers under the overall supervision of Dr. Bodo Otto, the noted Revolutionary War surgeon. George Washington stayed at the Red Lion Inn when he visited the hospital. During this period the Quakers held their meetings at the home of George Thomas in the Valley.
- ♦ 1800 Uwchlan Monthly Meeting transferred to the newly formed Caln Quarterly Meeting, to meet at the East (now, "Old") Caln Meeting House.
- ♦ 1806 A school probably held in the Meeting House lasting until 1835.
- ♦ 1827 The (tragic) "Separation" occurred within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and throughout the east coast, which divided most Meetings, including Uwchlan. However, here both groups (Hicksite and Orthodox) continued to use the Meeting House, meeting simultaneously but each in its own half of the room.
- ♦ 1830 The present lengthwise dividing paneling probably installed about this time which, together with the original cross panels, better served the two separate groups. See below.
- ♦ 1870 Extensive alterations made to the Meeting House during the next several years. These included lowering the ceiling, removing the balcony, removing the fireplaces and corner chimneys in favor of stoves, and adding two new chimneys at the roof peak, one on either end of the building.
- ♦ 1881 Uwchlan Preparative Meeting laid down, replaced by an "Indulged" Meeting under the care of Downingtown Preparative Meeting. Since East Nantmeal and Pikeland Preparative Meetings had ceased to exist some years prior, only Downingtown was left.
- ♦ 1894 The Indulged Meeting discontinued.
- ♦ 1900 Sessions of the Monthly Meeting began meeting exclusively at Downingtown, continuing to the present time.
- ♦ 1904 East side of the Meeting House rented to the Uwchlan Township School Board to be used as a high school, which continued until 1960 (?). Legal

action was required to get approval for this rental, since one group at first was opposed.

- ♦ 1920 The Meeting House (but not the graveyard) sold to the Uwchlan Grange.
- ♦ 1963 The Meeting House bought by the Women's Club of Uwchlan. A well was dug, parking area created, modern kitchen, bathroom and central heat installed.
- ♦ 1973 The Meeting House placed on the National Register.
- ♦ 1976 The Meeting House bought by the newly formed Uwchlan Conservation Trust, Inc. which, among other things, reinstalled the outside corner chimneys. The Women's Club continues to use the building on a regular basis. It is also used by other community groups and for special events.

EARLY SCHOOLS

From their earliest days Quakers have been concerned for education to be provided, not only for their own children, but for children at large. Throughout the colonies where Quakers existed, especially in the Philadelphia area, they started schools many of which became the forerunners of the public school system. Friends here in Uwchlan shared in these concerns but the actual record of schools under the Meeting's care is sparse – and thus about schools in the Township generally.

In the early years schooling was done in the home by parents or tutors. A family would announce that it was starting to hold classes for its children and invited others to come. According to Sue Brody, rarely was the tuition paid for in money – gifts in kind, such as a cord of wood or honey would be the payment. The Meeting usually paid for those of its poorer members.

There was during the late 1700s considerable interest in having the Meeting purchase land and build a school but this apparently never materialized. The Meeting, however, did establish -- or had oversight of -- schools throughout the area it covered. One such school was started in Downingtown in 1784 which in 1793 came under the Meeting's jurisdiction. This building, located in the middle of present Route #13 as it enters the town, also was where the first Quaker worship was held in the community.

School classes are known to have been held in Uwchlan Meeting House, starting in 1806 and continuing until about 1832, though little detailed information is known about them. And, as I will mention toward the end of this paper, we know that a "Miss Rebecca Maris," prior to the 1875 remodeling, conducted a school in the balcony -- which, it is said, had its own outside stairway. The Meeting helped this school financially. To assist these kinds of educational expenses, the Meeting early on established a

"School Fund." This fund still exists under the care of the Monthly Meeting and still assists needy families with their tuition costs.

QUANDARIES

We now come to what, for me, is the fun part of historical research – dealing with the "unknowns." As said, these we seem to have in abundance here at Uwchlan Meeting House. The remainder of this paper will deal with them. I will refer to them as "quandaries."

Quandary #1: When Was The First Meeting House Built?

Though there is no physical evidence, it is virtually certain that there was an earlier Meeting House on this property. As already stated, we know that in 1716 John Cadwallader donated a piece of ground, "*for a burying-place, and to set a Meeting House on, for ye use of ye people called Quakers.*" Though this was not recorded in deed form (not in Chester County at least), I am assured that Gilbert Cope would have had in his hand an actual document which he cited. But now things thicken a bit. Though not mentioned by Gilbert Cope, there was another conveyance made in 1737 of an acre of land by John Cadwallader and his wife, Sarah. This deed *is* recorded in the County Archives. Could it be that a first Meeting House was not built until then?

From my knowledge of early Quaker practice elsewhere, I am quite positive that the earlier date – 1716 – is the correct one. Let me cite a comparable situation to make the point. At the same time that these things were happening here in Uwchlan, another group not far off was going through the same sequence. They received permission to form a meeting and one of their members gave an acre of land – for both a Meeting House and a burial plot. We know that they immediately went ahead and built a log structure. Ten years later, for whatever reason, they decided to relocate, "*further up the valley, upon ye mountain*" where in 1726 they built the present Old Caln Meeting House on Route #340 east of Coatesville.

Early Quakers usually started out by meeting in homes. But this was only a stopgap. As soon as they got land they went ahead and built a Meeting House – usually a log structure – which would serve until they could manage a larger, more permanent building. I am quite certain that the first Meeting House here followed that pattern and that it was built in 1716, or shortly thereafter, when land was first given them.

Quandary #2: The Dividing Panels

Virtually all early Meeting Houses had dividing panels with sliding middle sections which, aided by counterweights, could be raised or lowered. Their primary purpose was to separate women from men when business matters were taken up – usually once a month (which gives rise to the term, "Monthly Meeting.") At first glance, this would seem like a put-down on women. Actually, it was the reverse. The aim was to

bolster the role of women in decision-making, for if they met jointly men were so likely to dominate that women would have little voice. By meeting separately, women had much more of a say. "Minutes" would be passed from one group to another, out of which process decisions of the Meeting were reached, in which women played an important role. These dividing panels, of course, have no function today other than to be a conversation piece.

The Meeting House here in Uwchlan was, to my knowledge, almost unique in regard to these dividing panels. For here they extended across the room whereas the typical pattern was to have them run lengthwise. Why this was the case here, I do not know. But our Meeting House in Downingtown -- which in many ways was patterned after Uwchlan -- has these dividers extending across the room.

Today, however, here at Uwchlan we see the panels running lengthwise. How was it that they were changed and when did this occur? In the preceding "Chronology," some of the alterations made to the Meeting House in the 1870s are mentioned. It has been supposed that the new lengthwise panels were installed as part of those alterations. But that doesn't make sense to me. As the 1800s progressed, Uwchlan Meeting came to be in serious decline and to install new panels at that time would hardly be warranted. In fact, by 1881 Uwchlan Preparative Meeting was laid down. Much more likely, the period when these new panels were needed was in the wake of the 1827 Separation. With each group now using half of the room, in order to divide each half further when business meetings were held, each half would need an additional divider. The old "across" panels were kept in place (probably cut down because of the lowered ceiling) so that, in fact, the meeting room was cut into four quadrants. According to the memory of Gilbert Smedley, the original east/west panels were not removed until around 1904. Evidence of their existence can still be seen by marks in the plaster.

Quandary #3: The Meeting House Doors

There has been uncertainty about the doors on the south facade of the Meeting House which are the main entrances. Originally, however, there was but a single door, covered by a stoop. Today there are two doors which, until recently, were covered by a porch. Since in early days, during worship it was customary for the men to sit on one side of the room, the women on the other (with the panels, of course raised), it was usual that there would be two entrance doors, one for each sex. Here at Uwchlan we can't be sure just when these two doors replaced the single one. The outline of a single door can be seen in the outside stonework. Indeed, additionally, there are two vertical lines in the pointing, one on either side of that single door, which suggest that yet another configuration of openings existed at some period. It may be that the present doors, as they now appear, were, in fact, constructed as part of the 1870s alterations.

Today few of us know that, originally, there was a door in the north wall. There is no indication of it on the inside wall. But if one looks carefully, its outline is clearly visible in the stone work on the outside. When the lengthwise panels were installed, they

bisected this door so that it had to be walled over. The bottom line shows it to have been about three feet above the ground. What was its purpose? Some have speculated that it was a special doorway for taking coffins from the Meeting House to the adjacent graveyard. Others say it functioned primarily as a mounting block for those traveling on horseback. I am inclined to this latter view.

In this regard, I thought it would be well to visit Bradford Meeting House in the village of Marshallton. It was built in 1765, a few years later than Uwchlan. Interestingly, it, too, was built with the dividing panels extending across the room, as evidenced by marks in the plaster. In 1788 the Meeting House caught on fire which did considerable damage -- a fire which was contained by those arriving for Meeting that morning throwing quantities of snow through the doors and windows.

When they repaired the damage, they made some changes to the Meeting House as well. Principally, they changed the panels to make them run lengthwise, probably to conform to the more conventional pattern. But they did something else which bears on our discussion. Bradford, I found, had the same "north" door as here at Uwchlan. And, as here, the only way to know of its existence is to see its outline in the stone work on the outside. In the same way it was raised above the ground so as to be level with the top rise of the facing benches. And, as here, it had to be abandoned when the lengthwise dividers were installed. The difference between the two Meetings Houses is that at Bradford there is no graveyard outside that doorway! Their large graveyard is well to the south of the Meeting House. Thus we must conclude that this raised north door at Bradford had been a mounting block entrance to the Meeting House. This makes me sure that the same applies to Uwchlan as well.

One of the first things visitors to old Quaker Meeting Houses ask -- in addition to the dividing panels -- has to do with the raised benches at the front of the room. Early Friends had the custom of "recording" selected persons who were well-grounded in the Quaker faith and possessed spiritual sensitivity. These "ministers" -- and a related group called, "Elders" -- had oversight of the spiritual life of the Meeting. They undoubtedly provided most of the vocal ministry during worship. Accordingly, they were expected to sit on the facing benches, not only as status, but so they could be better heard as well. It may be that these mounting block doorways were to provide special entrance to the facing benches. Today, of course, these raised benches, like the panels, no longer have special purposes. Many practices of early days were abandoned as times changed. Those special "mounting door" entrances were among the first casualties.

Quandary #4: The Balcony And That Second Floor Window

Perhaps the biggest change made to the Meeting House during the alterations of the 1870s was to lower the ceiling -- by 66". This had the effect of removing the balcony and turned the upper windows into mere "window-dressing." Without doubt, there was a balcony in the Meeting House. It is thought that it extended along the south wall only. One problem that I see with having benches in the balcony is that, with the

dividing panels running across the room, people there would unlikely be able to view the facing benches which, as we have seen, was where much of the "action" took place. Could it be that there were never benches in that balcony and that it had been built with other purposes in mind? I will amplify this thought in a minute.

And this takes us to the biggest "quandary" of all -- that second floor window on the southwest which is "out of position." Why is it so close to the other window? Why wasn't it located further east in a symmetrical fashion, as is the case with all the other windows in the building? This window tells us something. But what? It wasn't just put there on a whim.

Returning to my thought of a moment ago, how about this for an idea? As already said, from various sources, including newspaper clippings, there is evidence that school classes were held in that balcony during the mid-1800s. Could it be that this mysterious window was put close to the other so as to bring in more light for this school?

A noted theologian once observed, "*Faith is living with unanswered questions.*" Personally, I have no idea what that balcony was used for. I'm sure there are other 'unanswered questions' here at Uwchlan Meeting House. No mind. It's a beautiful and important building which should be preserved. Let's make the most of it!

F.G.B.

Downingtown, PA
October 14, 2001