

## Quakers in Early Columbia County, Part 1

By Darren Price

*[Excerpted and edited from Willard R. Rhoads, History of the Catawissa Quaker Meeting and the Roaring Creek Quaker Meeting (Numidia, 1963). Rhoads was also the author of Genealogy of the Rarig Family (Numidia, 1935). Editorial comments are enclosed in square brackets. Notes not in square brackets are Rhoads'.]*

### Introduction

Five meeting houses of the Society of Friends [Quakers] were located within Columbia County, Pennsylvania, and four others were located within the verge or influence of those in the county during the last 175 years [1787-1963]. These included Catawissa, Roaring Creek, Millville, Greenwood and Berwick within the county, together with Muncy (Pennsdale), Loyal Sock (Pine Grove), Elkland and Shamokin (Bear Gap) in adjacent counties.

Friends did not use the names of the days of the week or the months of the year, because these names were considered to be of heathen origin. Sunday was First Day and Saturday was Seventh Day, January was First Month and December was Twelfth Month.

*[Ed. note: the numbering of months and years was a bit more complicated prior to the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1752.]*

The Quakers refused to take an oath for public office or in the courts of law. They felt an oath created a double standard of truth, one for the courts and another for daily use, while they maintained that men should speak the truth at all times. Friends have consistently protested against war in all its forms, and for this view or stand, have suffered much in person and property. From the earliest history, Friends developed a strong objection to slavery. They believed it was morally wrong for one person to have ownership and control over another. Before slavery ended, many Friends were active in the Underground Railroad.

*[Ed. note: Prior to the Revolutionary War, a large percentage of public offices in Pennsylvania were held by Quakers. But, as support for the rebellion grew, some of the more radical elements succeeded in requiring loyalty oaths as a condition for holding public office or serving on committees, effectively reducing the Quaker voice in public affairs. Friends' Meetings throughout the colonies debated the morality of paying taxes levied specifically to support the rebellion. Those who refused to do so were sometimes imprisoned and their property seized. Possibly the most outspoken denouncer of the Quakers was Henry Laurens, a member of the Continental Congress from South Carolina and also, probably not coincidentally, one of the biggest slave traders in the colonies.]*

The Friends Meeting Houses were plain, simple rugged structures built of readily available material, such as logs, stone, brick or wood. They contained only hard benches and had no altar, pulpit, stained glass windows, choir or music, and had no minister or prepared program of worship. The term "minister" as used by Friends was applied to those men and women, from their own group who had no special training, but who nevertheless had a deep and abiding belief

in the Quaker faith, who had a talent for speaking, and who had a particular desire or concern to attend other meetings and visit with their families.

The religious meetings held on First Day (Sunday) in the various meeting houses throughout the country were known as Indulged and Preparative Meetings. They may have been called Preparative Meetings because the various problems and questions of discipline were prepared for presentation to the Monthly Meetings. The Preparative Meetings were permanently established and did not have to ask for permission to continue. However if a meeting was held at the indulgence (permission) of a Monthly Meeting it was known as an Indulged Meeting. All of the Meetings in the Columbia County area started as Indulged Meetings.

Since the First-day religious meetings were carried on in silence, no business matters were discussed. To carry on the business and discipline of the Friends, two or more Preparative Meetings would unite once a month as a Monthly Meeting. Monthly Meetings are extremely important in that the minutes of these meetings are sent to the Quarterly or Yearly Meetings, where they are preserved and provide the most accurate and available source of information for studying the history of the Quakers. All Monthly Meetings in a given area come together four times a year as a Quarterly Meeting. Once a year the Quarterly Meetings covering a large area meet for a Yearly Meeting to consider the condition of its membership, as well as problems of national importance. In the Columbia County area, the Quarterly and Yearly Meetings have been held at Philadelphia.

[William] Penn's sons, Richard and Thomas, on November 5, 1768, purchased a large tract of land from the Indians - The Six Nations - that extended north from Sunbury to New York and west to Ohio, and included Columbia County. The Penn brothers insisted that this tract of land be called Northumberland County, and also insisted that the county seat be established at the old Indian town of "Shamokin," and be called Sunbury. Northumberland County was created on March 21, 1772, and after that time it was possible to purchase land in what is now Columbia County, have it surveyed, receive a deed and have it recorded in the Court House at Sunbury.

On February 14, 1770, a patent for 282 ¼ acres of land in the Catawissa area was granted by the Proprietaries of Pennsylvania to Edward Shippen Jr. and Joseph Shippen Jr. It often happened, when land was offered in a new purchase, that certain people in Philadelphia purchased large tracts of this land, sight unseen as an investment, and later sold it to bona fide settlers. The above sale appears to be such a case. By deed dated May 1, 1773, Edward and Joseph Shippen sold the same land to Ellis Hughes.

### **The Quakers Reach Catawissa and Roaring Creek**

The Quakers were the first group of people to settle in Catawissa and Roaring Creek Valley. They came from Oley, Exeter and Maiden Creek Townships in Berks County. Because the road north from Reading had not yet reached Catawissa, they travelled overland from Reading to the Susquehanna River at Harris Ferry. John Harris operated a ferry at this location and the place was later called Harrisburg by his son, John Harris Jr., who laid out the town. From Harris Ferry the Quakers ascended the Susquehanna River in boats to the mouth of the Catawissa Creek. They arrived here about 1774, as they were here before the Revolutionary War.

Moses Roberts and Ellis Hughes were among the earliest settlers in Catawissa, and it is believed that the Quakers in this region first met and worshiped in the home of Moses Roberts around 1775. The minutes of the Exeter Meeting for October 25th, 1775 record "The Committee appointed to visit Friends at Cottowessey ... are of the mind that their request of holding a First-day Meeting on the First day of the week might be granted them till the Half-year Meeting in the Spring, with which this meeting concurs". It is thus noted that the First-day meeting—an Indulged Meeting—was setup (started) at Catawissa, by permission granted them by the Exeter Monthly Meeting. The Exeter minutes [covered] Catawissa from 1775 to 1787. An important minute is recorded in the Exeter Monthly minutes of May 30th, 1787 at Maiden Creek, as follows: "Maiden Creek representatives inform that William Hughes of Cottowessey has proposed to convey a lot of ground to Friends for the use of a burying ground and other uses as Friends may see occasion."

By deed dated June 27, 1778, Ellis Hughes sold 92 ¼ acres (part of the above 282 ¼ acres) to William Hughes, as recorded in Northumberland County Book C, page 186. William Hughes, a Quaker from Berks County, laid out a town along the Catawissa Creek and called the place "Hughesburg" in 1786. The name was later changed from Hughesburg to Catawissa, probably sometime after 1796. The Town Plan of Hughesburg contained a total of 92 [numbered] lots. One of the parcels not numbered, and located along South Street, between Third and Fourth Streets, was the plot that William Hughes conveyed to the Quakers, [specifically,] to Moses Roberts of Oley Township, John Mears of Reading, Thomas Clayton and Job Hughes of Catawissa, as Trustees. Exeter [Monthly Meeting] on October 31st, 1787 granted permission to hold an Indulged Meeting at the home of Job Hughes at Cottowessey on one First-day (Sunday), and on the following First-day at the home of Joseph Penrose at Roaring Creek.

The State Historical Markers and other historical sources state that the Meeting House at Catawissa was built in 1775. The Exeter minutes do not support this date. William Hughes granted the Meeting House lot to four Trustees on September 15 1787, twelve years after 1775 (as a matter of historical interest it should be noted that two days after William Hughes granted the lot to the Quakers for a meeting house at Catawissa, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia, on September 17, 1787, signed the Constitution of the United States of America). In October 1787, Exeter granted permission to hold meetings at the home of Job Hughes, and in December 1789, John Mears informed that "Friends will fix on some place to meet." All this would indicate that the Meeting House at Catawissa was not built until 1789 or sometime thereafter. Since the first religious meeting at Catawissa was held in 1775, someone may have erroneously assumed that the meeting house was also constructed during the same year.

Roaring Creek obtained their plot of ground for a meeting house during 1793. On September 16, 1793, John Lee of Exeter Township and Ann his wife conveyed [a tract] to Casper Strawl, Isaac Wiggins and Nathan Lee (son of John Lee) all of Catawissa Township, as Trustees for the Religious Society of People called Quakers, for use as a School, Meeting House and Burial Grounds.

At the Monthly Meeting at Exeter on 2nd month (February), 25th day 1796, "With the concurrence of the Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting, a Monthly Meeting was established at Cottowessey to be composed of and include all members residing within the verge or belonging to the several Meetings of Roaring Creek, Cottowessey, Fishing Creek and Muncy, that it is to be fixed at Cotowessey - - -" The First Monthly Meeting at Catawissa was held fourth month (April) 23d, 1796, and was attended by a committee from Philadelphia.

The minutes of the Exeter Monthly Meeting do not give the dates when the meeting houses at Catawissa and Roaring Creek were built and this has led to some confusion. As already noted, when the Catawissa Meeting House was constructed is open to question. An approximate date when the meeting house at Roaring Creek was built is given in the deed granting the Beaver Meadow, Newlin, and Slabtown Road, dated August 1795.

### **Early Roads in Roaring Creek Valley**

One of the most valuable improvements made by the Quakers in Roaring Creek Valley was the opening of the road generally known as the "Old Reading Road". During May 1789, seventeen men from the valley petitioned the Court of Quarter Sessions at Sunbury to open the road, probably the first surveyed road in the valley. On August 26, 1789, six Quakers, William Hughes, Isaiah Hughes, Thomas Clayton, William Collins, Thomas Willets and Samuel Mears, viewed the road with favor, and the Court ordered the road opened. It began at Hughesburg (Catawissa), crossed Catawissa Creek, and extended over the Little Mountain to the region of [what is now] the Schuylkill County line, from where a road had already been built to Reading. It was the final section of the road linking Catawissa to Reading. This was more than a road to Reading, it was a road to Philadelphia and from there by boat to England and Germany, and became the great road over which settlers, mostly Germans, entered the valley. Fortunate indeed was Roaring Creek Valley in having a road leading directly to Reading and Philadelphia at such an early date.

Six years after the "Old Reading Road" was laid out, there was a need for a second road more nearly in the center of the valley. On May 20, 1795, Nehemiah Hutton, Hezekiah Boone [a close cousin of frontiersman Daniel Boone], Isaac Penrose, Joseph Fisher, Edward Hughes and John Cleaver, viewers, and probably all Quakers, asked the Court for the Beaver Meadow, Newlin and Slabtown Road. This road began at the "Old Reading Road" at the foot of the Little Mountain, and ran past Beaver Meadow to Newlin, where it turned sharply to the north, passed through Slabtown, and joined the "Old Reading Road" again at the top of the Fulling Mill Hill.

The road may have been straight to Newlin in order to reach the tavern of Casper Rhodes (1763-1837), which was located on the site of [in 1963] the home of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Levan, one time owned by Andrew Boyer. Casper Rhodes had a tavern there in 1804, and it might easily have been there as early as 1795. The tavern was probably built at this particular site because of an Indian spring of fine water located behind the tavern at the foot of the hill.

The deed for this road states that it will pass the "Meeting House of the People called Quakers", therefore we know that the road was definitely planned to serve the Meeting House, and the

above statement may have referred to the site only. Most of the historical accounts state that the Meeting House was built in 1796 and the above data from the deed would justify this date.

The remainder of this history will in general cover the Catawissa, part of the Muncy, and the Roaring Creek Monthly Meetings, but only the essence of the important minutes will be presented, and the dates will be given in the style used today.

### **Catawissa Friends Monthly Meeting**

The Quaker Monthly Meeting at Catawissa opened on April 23, 1796, and was composed of Friends of Catawissa, Roaring Creek, Fishing Creek (Millville) and Muncy (Pennsdale). It was the first Monthly Meeting ever held in Columbia County. Catawissa Meeting appointed Job Hughes, Nathan Lee and Abel Roberts to attend the Quarterly Meeting at Philadelphia.

June 13, 1796. John Mears, Thomas Clayton, Job Hughes and Thomas Roberts (son of Moses Roberts, deceased) were appointed Trustees of the Catawissa Meeting House and Lot.

September 24, 1796. Fishing Creek asks continuance of First-day Meeting and permission was granted.

April 22, 1797. Muncy Preparative notes that Loyal Sock asks permission to hold First-day Meetings at home of Nathaniel Pearson. Such permission was granted on May 27, 1797, and the first meeting was held on the first Sunday in June.

June 24, 1797. John Mears informs that a sum of money raised in Philadelphia has been put into his hands to establish a school at Catawissa, and he has purchased a lot for that purpose.

March 24, 1798. Friends of Fishing Creek and Loyal Sock ask permission to continue their meetings, and the request was granted.

July 21, 1798. The committee on schools report that a considerable number of pupils have attended schools taught at Catawissa, Roaring Creek, Fishing Creek and Muncy.

August 25, 1798. The school building is now built at Catawissa and school is kept at Roaring Creek on a lot given by a Friend, and schools are open at Fishing Creek and Muncy.

August 5, 1799. The Quarterly Meeting at Philadelphia agrees to the proposal of Catawissa to establish a new Monthly Meeting at Muncy to be composed of the Preparative Meetings of Muncy and Fishing Creek.

September 21, 1799. A proposal was made that a house be built at Berwick to be used as a meeting house and school as title to the lot appeared to be satisfactory. However, title to the lot was not secured until 1810.

November 22, 1800. Aquilla Starr asks for the privilege of Berwick to hold meetings on First-day.

December 27, 1800. The committee from the Catawissa Monthly Meeting agrees to an Indulged Meeting for Berwick.

Note: Between 1802 and 1804 there were many requests from members of Catawissa for certificates to move to other meetings in Canada and Ohio.

July 26, 1806. Benjamin Sharpless, Ellis Hughes, Thomas Clayton and Bezaleel Hayhurst were appointed to collect births and burials within the area of the Catawissa Monthly Meeting.

January 24, 1807. Many Quaker families were leaving Catawissa. This raised the question of continuing the Catawissa Monthly Meeting.

October 24, 1807. John Lloyd moves to Short Creek [Meeting], Ohio.

March 26, 1808. Isaac Wiggins, William Watson, Robert Penrose, Rachel and Banone Penrose move to Yonge Street [Meeting], Canada.

May 21, 1808. New Trustees for the Meeting House and Lot at Roaring Creek are Jeremiah Hughes, Thomas Penrose and Bezaleel Hayhurst.

November 7, 1808. Note from Quarterly Meeting at Philadelphia, "That Meetings at Catawissa and Roaring Creek be connected into one Preparative Meeting held alternately - - - , and the said Preparative Meetings to be joined to and become a branch of the Muncy Monthly Meeting."

December 24, 1808. The Catawissa Monthly Meeting appointed Thomas Ellis, Benjamin Sharpless, Nathan Lee, Bezaleel Hayhurst and Robert Field to attend the Muncy Monthly Meeting with the minutes and records of this meeting. This was the last Monthly Meeting at Catawissa.

Note: The Catawissa Monthly Meeting was weakened and laid down because many families moved away. The Quakers moved to three locations, namely Yonge Street, near Newmarket, in Ontario Canada, about 30 miles north of Toronto; Pelham near Fenwick in Ontario, about 15 miles west of Niagara Falls; and Short Creek in Harrison County, Ohio, about 15 miles northwest of Wheeling, West Virginia. The reason for their migration is not definitely known. Some believe it was an effort to get more and better land. Others believe many Quakers moved to Canada to avoid being drafted, as these were troublesome times before the War of 1812 with Great Britain.

*[Ed. note: the Catawissa Meeting continued as a Preparative Meeting, subordinate at first to the Muncy Monthly Meeting, and later to the Roaring Creek Monthly Meeting.]*

Catawissa, plagued with a small membership, laid down their Preparative Meeting in 1855, but continued as a member of the Roaring Creek Monthly Meeting until it closed in 1917. It is possible that during the time following 1855, meetings were held at the homes of Friends in Catawissa.

During 1890, Mary Emma Walter (1841-1930), of Elysburg, came to Catawissa and took care of the Meeting house and grounds. During the next 40 years she worshiped in her beloved meeting house, sometimes alone, sometimes with Friends. She was born September 4, 1841 near Elysburg and died March 24, 1930, at the age of 89, and rests with her Friends in the beautiful cemetery nearby.



Catawissa Quaker Meeting House.—Erected 1789 or 1790

The Catawissa Meeting house 30 feet front and 27 ½ feet deep, constructed of logs and protected with a good roof, is in fairly good condition, considering that it is at least 173 years old [*in 1963 - at least 226 years old in 2016*]. A partition provided separate rooms for the men and the women, which was opened for services. Rough benches with backs and two stoves constitute the main furnishings. The building is located in a beautiful grove amid majestic oak and elm trees. A low stone wall separates the yard from the cemetery where the Friends rest in eternal peace.

The property is now maintained by the Borough of Catawissa, and consists of a beautiful shady lawn in which to rest and reflect on the past history of the Friends. Each year more people and more groups of people visit the grove to learn about the early history and the stories of this ancient and historic edifice, the oldest house of worship between Sunbury and Wyoming.

*[Ed. note: although Willard Rhoads provides little information about the Catawissa Quaker burial ground, FindAGrave.com lists over 250 burials there, including those of John Cleaver, Bezaleel Hayhurst, Isaiah Hughes, Benjamin Sharpless and Mary Emma Walter.]*

*[End of Part 1 - next: Roaring Creek Monthly Meeting, the Orthodox / Hicksite separation, and the arrival of the John family.]*