Quakers (officially Society of Friends) Christian sect that arose in England in the 1650s, founded by George Fox. The name derived from the injunction given by early Quaker leaders that their followers tremble at the word of the Lord. Quakers rejected the episcopal organization of the Church of England, believing in the priesthood of all believers and the direct relationship between man and the spiritual light of God. Quakers originally worshipped God in meditative silence unless someone was moved by the Holy Spirit. Since the mid-19th century, their meetings have included hymns and readings. There are c.200,000 Quakers worldwide.

Summary Article: Quakers
From Encyclopedia of American Studies

The Quakers, or Society of Friends, are best known in American history for the settlement of Pennsylvania, whose political life they dominated for decades and whose founder, William Penn, was a Quaker convert. It was there, with Penn's “holy experiment,” that the Quakers made their first mark on American culture, establishing a colony where Quakers and non-Quakers alike could worship freely and live together in peace. Their influence in American life, however, extends well beyond this limited range.

The Quakers had their origins in Britain, where in 1647 George Fox began teaching publicly that the essence of Christianity was to be found not in outward rites, sacraments, or dogma but instead in the idea of an “innerlight,” a spark of divinity that existed within all persons. The stern Calvinism of the Puritans, with its emphasis on predestination and original sin, was replaced by a more optimistic view: all could attain salvation, said Fox. Quaker worship was simple and spontaneous; people spoke as the Spirit moved them.

This was the faith that William Penn, who was granted a large section of land in the New World in satisfaction of a debt owed to his late father, brought with him across the ocean in 1682. Pennsylvania would be a second colonial “city upon a hill”; Penn’s “holy experiment” would demonstrate to the world the transforming power of Quakerism when unhampered by state harassment.

The Quakers' belief in religious toleration should not be confused with religious indifferentism. American Quakers of the colonial period certainly believed that they possessed the true approach to religion. Although New England Puritans thought they had purged their worship of the ritual and “superstition” that had made the Church of England so distasteful to them, theirs was still too outward and formalistic a religion for the Quakers. Decades before Pennsylvania was settled, Quakers living in Rhode Island and elsewhere would make their way up to Massachusetts in an effort to rouse its benighted inhabitants from their dogmatic slumber and awaken them to the aridity of their faith. They would disrupt Puritan church services, heckle ministers, and on occasion would even walk naked up and down the church aisles. Not surprisingly, the Friends were banned repeatedly from Massachusetts. As Daniel Boorstin has noted, this only lent further encouragement to such Quaker sojourns. Mary Dyer, an ardent Quaker, more than once spurned offers of clemency by Massachusetts authorities who obviously felt uncomfortable executing her, but so committed was she to martyrdom in the service of overturning what she considered the unjust law against Quakers that she repeatedly demanded that the death sentence be carried out—which it finally was, in 1660.

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Thus the Quakers look on their principles with the utmost seriousness, and indeed the history of
colonial Pennsylvania during the first half of the eighteenth century is the story of a people so
committed to principle as to find the compromise inherent in politics a violation of their consciences.
To this day Pennsylvania law permits citizens who in conscience cannot take an oath to take an
affirmation instead—a direct result of Quaker intransigence on the issue in the early eighteenth century.
Their principled and uncompromising attachment to their beliefs—pacifism in particular—ultimately
forced them to relinquish their positions in government; Quakers began resigning from Pennsylvania
offices in droves in 1756, all the while holding out hope that they might someday return when the
political climate was more favorable.

It was not to be. But while the period of Quaker dominance in Pennsylvania had come to an end for
good, their influence persisted. With political avenues now effectively closed to them, Quakers
redoubled their efforts in a number of important causes in which they were at the forefront in the late
eighteenth century. Their humanitarian impulses led them not only to engage in such works of charity as
the construction of hospitals but also to participate in some of the most celebrated causes of the
Enlightenment and the reform movements of the nineteenth century: improving conditions in insane
asylums, rendering the prison system more humane, and, of course, working to end slavery. The
Quakers played an especially central role in this latter movement, of which Lucretia Mott and John
Greenleaf Whittier were perhaps the two best-known Quaker exemplars.

During World War I, Quakers established the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), an
organization that made it possible for Quaker conscientious objectors (for whom participation in war
was clearly out of the question) to contribute in a significant way toward the alleviation of the suffering
that the fighting was leaving in its wake. They thus expanded the kind of work the Friends had done
during the Civil War and the Spanish-American War. In 1947, the AFSC received perhaps the most
prestigious honor for which it was eligible when it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with its
British counterpart.

That Quaker principles share a certain congruence with important strains in the American experience is
evident in many ways. The Quakers' disdain for social distinctions, their belief in civil disobedience, their
commitment to toleration in the eighteenth-century sense—all of these resonate well with the classical
liberal origins of the United States.

Whatever the Quakers' influence on American culture, which of course is difficult to quantify, their
experience in the United States serves to represent certain dilemmas that have afflicted nearly all
unique American communities. Most obviously, the pressures of assimilation, especially intense in a
culture committed to the principle of *e pluribus unum* (“from many, one”), have taken their toll on
traditional Quaker practices. For the most part, Quakers have abandoned the customary dress and
peculiarities of speech (using *thee* and *thou*, for example) that had identified the Friends for centuries.
At the same time, though, some observers of Quakers have noted that the outward modernization of
the Quaker religion reflects the peculiar genius of their tradition: based not on dogma but on personal
experience, it can readily adapt to changing conditions without relinquishing its essential spirit. Thus the
Friends retain a quality of simplicity that takes Quaker principles seriously without, for example,
insisting on the use of a particular style of hat.

Disagreement, of course, persists among liberal and conservative Quakers (though steps toward
greater unity are also evident) on matters of controversy that divide nearly all Christian denominations,
but none of this can detract from the vitality of a tradition that, although of British origin, is in many ways characteristically American.

*The first visit of William Penn to America - a conference with the colonists [Victorian conception].* 1883. Howard Pyle, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

*George Fox. c.1835.* Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.


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