

'The Separation' Of the Friends

First of Three Articles

By ARCH MERRILL

MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS, more widely known as Quakers, were among the very earliest settlers in Western New York.

The first Quaker colony in the Genesee Country was in Farmington in northern Ontario County, which after 172 years still is the stronghold of the faith in these parts.

The Quakers, thrifty, plain-living, peace-loving, ever the friends of the underdog, left their imprint on this region — as on so many others.

THE FIRST Friends in the Genesee County came from the Berkshire hills of Massachusetts in 1789, the year that settlement began on the vast Phelps and Gorham Purchase, which embraced virtually all of York State west of Seneca Lake.

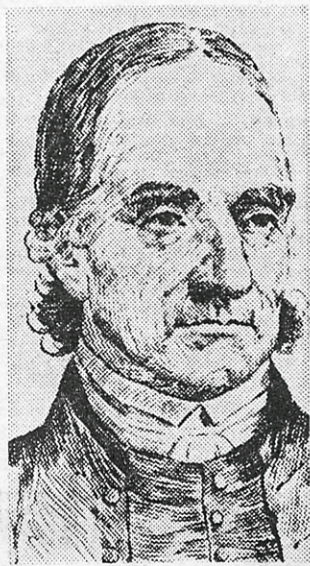
The pioneer Quakers were Nathan Comstock, his sons, Darius and Otis, and Robert Hathaway. They cleared some land in Farmington, planted it to wheat and built a log cabin. They went back to the Berkshires for the winter but returned to Farmington in the spring with their families and others of the sect, in ox-drawn wagons.

Their representatives obtained from Phelps and Gorham a deed to 30,000 acres, known as the Quaker Tract, and including most of the present towns of Farmington and Manchester.

The farms in the tract were assigned to 12 Quaker settlers by lot, despite the society's abhorrence of any form of gambling. They tamed the wilderness, built comfortable homes and prospered.

In migrating to the Genesee Country without the

Arch
Merrill's
History



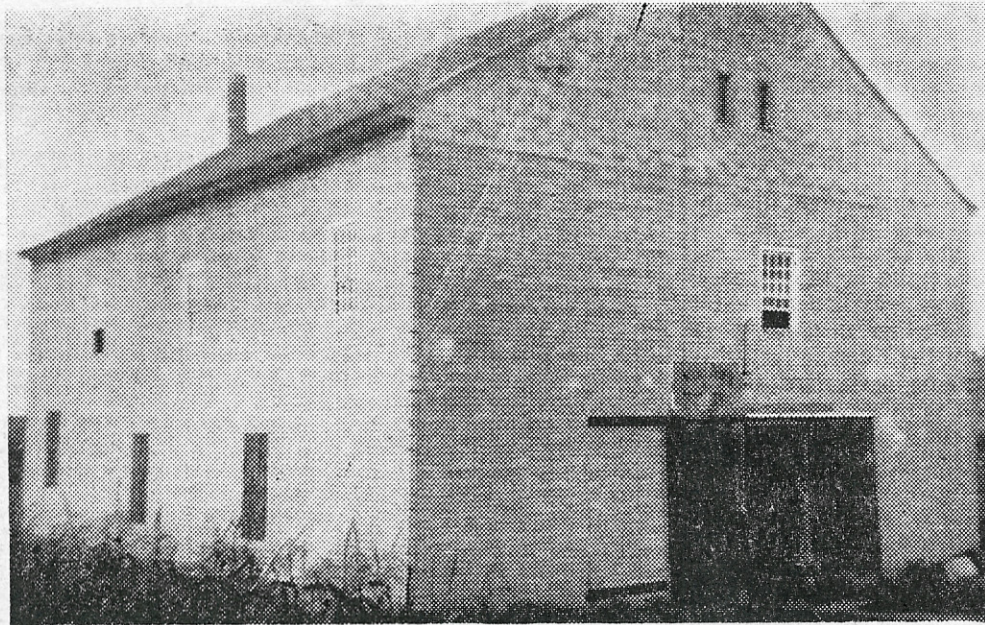
ELIAS HICKS

... founder of Quaker branch

sanction of the North Adams Meeting, these pioneers breached the discipline of the society and were disowned by it—for a time.

In 1794 a group of Pennsylvania Quakers came to Canandaigua to assist the Indians in negotiating the Pickering Treaty with the infant republic. That treaty settled the land claims of the Indians. The Pennsylvanians got to know the Farmington Friends, spread a good report about them and soon they were restored to the fold.

IN 1796 the Farmington Friends built a log church, the first Quaker meeting house west of Utica. The present 85-year-old church is on the same site, on the fringe of the tiny community which was named New Salem and became Farmington. But it no longer has a postoffice and it is now better known as "Pumpkin Hook." There are several versions as to



CHURCHLY BARN — Built in 1816 Farmington building has been used as a Quaker meeting house, this as a potato storage barn since 1927.

the origin of that curious nickname,

The log church was replaced in 1804 by a frame structure. That burned down in 1876, when the present meeting house was built. In 1816 a larger church rose across the road to accommodate the yearly meeting and for a few years all the Farmington Quakers worshiped there.

The Farmington Meeting (headquarters of a district of the faith), was the parent of the branches which sprang up, in Rochester, Henrietta, Riga, Wheatland, Macedon Center and other communities. The Friends in Monroe County alone numbered nearly 600 by 1828.

THAT YEAR, the most momentous one in Quaker history, saw the great schism or, as the Friends called it, the Separation. It came about because an aging, eloquent Quaker preacher named Elias Hicks for years had been preaching a new Quaker gospel. Hicks had come this way and attracted a large following. His crusade divided the American Friends into two factions — Orthodox and Liberal or Hicksite.

Hicks was an early abolitionist and had a part in passage of the law which ended slavery in New York State in 1827.

But he lives in history as the builder of a new Quaker theology. Deploring

the dogmatism and inflexibility of the theologians, he sought to liberalize the Friends doctrines, to make them closer to those of the English Society and approaching the creed of the Unitarians.

Elias Hicks was in his grave within three years after the Separation. By that time his adherents outnumbered the Orthodox wing in the rural regions.

The Western New York Friends were hopelessly divided. In many a community there were two Quaker meeting houses where there had been but one before. Families were split, with some husbands worshiping in one church and their wives in another.

IN MANY PLACES the Orthodox Friends left the meeting houses to the Liberals. In Farmington the Hicksites took over the larger meeting house and the rival group moved back into the smaller church across the way. The old Hicksite house of worship was sold in 1927 to a farmer who moved it back from the road and converted it into a potato storage barn. Now covered with slate shingles, it retains a bit of its old churchly appearance, with its great hand-hewn beams and many-paned second story windows.

IN ROCHESTER Friends had built a frame meeting house in 1822, on North Fitzhugh Street near Al-

len. It was the third house of worship to rise in the young settlement.

After the schism, the Hicksites took over that church, remaining there until 1876 when they moved to Hubbell Park. Those of the "Old Faith" built a meeting house on Jay Street, moving to Alexander Street in 1873.

Early Rochester Quakers included business and professional leaders of the mill town. Among them were Lindley Murray Moore, educator and Abolitionist and Silas Cornell, a surveyor, who also was a reformer and teacher. And there was Lars Larsen, Norwegian Friend, whose Atkinson Street home was a haven for hundreds of his countrymen bound for the West on the Erie Canal. Larsen joined the Hicksites, his wife remained in the Orthodox fold.

WHEATLAND, where the first Quaker family settled in 1804, felt the impact of the separation. For nine years the Hicksites and the rival flock shared the frame meeting house, built on the Quaker Road in 1825. One group met there mornings, the other in the afternoon. The Quaker Road cobblestone structure, now the home of Genesee Grange, was built by the Orthodox Friends and sold to the Hicksites. Then the Orthodox flock erected a frame meeting house on South

Road. In the 1870s both houses of worship were closed.

The other early societies in Monroe County did not last long after the schism, although the Friends built a meeting house on Quaker Meeting House Road in Mendon as late as the 1830s. Only the cemetery there remains to tell of an old Quaker settlement.

AFTER the Separation, many Friends drifted over to the Unitarians. Later the sect was further weakened by so many of its members "marrying out." Any Quaker who wedded a non-member was automatically dropped from the society.

But it was the schism of 1828 that gave the Quakers the big push downhill.

Next Week—Western New York Quakerism Today