

A Short History of Reading Monthly Meeting

Although many Friends (Quakers) are known to have settled in Berks County as early as 1718 as part of William Penn's Holy Experiment, the plan for Reading Towne was not drawn until 1743 by an agent of Penn's son, Thomas. Reading's first religious edifice, fittingly, was a Quaker Meetinghouse. Some early historians mention a small log building as early as 1750, but its location is unknown. (E. Michener says it was "on their burying ground" which would place it on Church Street directly behind the present building.) It is known that the Court House was used for special Friends Meetings that were too large for a house or meetinghouse.

In 1759 lots #402 and #403 on Prince Street (now 106-108 N. Sixth Street) were purchased by the Quakers from the Penns and a small log building was erected from trees felled there. A burial ground was also established. Needing a larger Meetinghouse within a few years, Friends built a 'round log' structure at Queen and Thomas Streets (now 412 Washington Street) which was to serve them well for the 103 years.

In 1776 the pacifist Friends turned the Meetinghouse into a hospital for wounded Hessian soldiers who had been captured by the Continental Army at the Battle of Trenton (New Jersey). One of the soldiers carved pictures into the woodwork, and this is part of the display you will find at the Meetinghouse today.

In 1787 the Quakers built a one-story log schoolhouse adjacent to their Meetinghouse which continued in operation until 1870. In 1815 the Quaker schoolmaster took education with a religious emphasis to the county prisoners. He found the venture so successful that he broadened the scope and started the first First Day School (Sunday School), an idea that spread rapidly to other meetings.

Responding to the need for a new, larger, permanent structure, Friends built a stone structure in 1868 on the Sixth-Street site of the 1759 log Meetinghouse. This is the building in which we worship today. In keeping with the Quaker tradition of service this meetinghouse became, in addition to a house of worship, the Red Cross headquarters during World War I. In 1920 the Red Cross added the annex to the building which, after that organization outgrew it, the Friends then made available to the Daniel Boone chapter of the Boy Scouts for their headquarters.

Later this building continued its multiple roles. Refugee Lutheran Latvians met here regularly during the 1960's and 70's. The Rehab Workshop, an independent project for handicapped persons, used the premises for many years. Other groups whose ideas are in harmony with the Quaker belief that "there is that of God in every man" to seek and discover, use the Meetinghouse from time to time.

Until September 1971 venerable with age, was an elm tree, scion of the tree under which William Penn concluded his famous treaty with the Indians - the only treaty of its kind, unbroken still. Symbolically it stood as a reminder that all people are brothers, and that the future will be bright in proportion to the ability of individuals to love one another.