

## The Hicksite-Orthodox Split

Ironically, for a religion known for its emphasis on peace and the amicable settling of differences, religious dissension among the membership of the Religious Society of Friends in the United States grew to such a point that it culminated in the Split of 1827–1828, when American Quakerism divided into two distinct branches. The Hicksite branch comprised the largest number of Quakers and tended to be made up of rural Friends. They followed the ideas of liberal Quaker Elias Hicks in that they had a more universal approach toward the Divine, allowed for more individualism in belief, and stressed the doctrine of the “Inner Light.” The Orthodox Friends, on the other hand, were largely urban-dwelling Friends and were significantly influenced by a procession of traveling British Quaker evangelical ministers. They stressed the authority of the elders, emphasized the Bible, were wholly Christ-centered theologically, and resembled other Protestant denominations in matters of dogma.

Even though Deer Creek was definitely a rural meeting, the local congregation divided. The Hicksites, who greatly outnumbered the Orthodox, kept the meetinghouse still used today. The Orthodox met in each other’s homes until they erected a stone meetinghouse on Old Quaker Road in Darlington. Unfortunately, the Split divided Quaker families, and both sides took pleasure in disowning those who disagreed with them.

Finally, in the twentieth century, cooler heads prevailed, and the two Deer Creek congregations began meeting together informally in the 1920s. By 1949, both meetings saw their way clear to formally unite, anticipating the unification of both Baltimore Yearly Meetings in 1968.

### Deer Creek Friends Today

Deer Creek Friends Meeting in the year 2022 consists of approximately 52 members along with many attenders. It still upholds Friends’ testimonies of stewardship, peace, integrity, equality, and simplicity through its committee work and interaction with the Darlington community.

Friends of all ages meet at 10:00 a.m. for a hymn and a period of silent worship. Then adults and children separate and each participate in Sunday School lessons taught by members of the congregation. Meeting for Worship, which begins in silence, begins at approximately 10:45 a.m. Here, contemporary Friends, like those who preceded them, “wait upon the Lord” and deliver vocal ministry when spiritually prompted.

Visitors are most welcome.



*Banner at Deer Creek meetinghouse.*

## A Brief History of Deer Creek Friends Meeting



### Establishing Deer Creek Friends

Members of the Religious Society of Friends, more commonly known as Quakers, moved from West River and Herring Creek Meetings in Anne Arundel County to settle in the Bush River area of present-day Harford County. Here they established a meeting, perhaps as early as 1706. As time went on, many Bush River Friends moved north to settle on the excellent farming land in and around Darlington along Deer Creek. At the same time, some Pennsylvania Friends moved south into the same area.

These Quakers probably worshiped in one another’s houses when they could not make the journey to either Bush River Meeting or Nottingham Friends Meeting in Oxford, Pennsylvania. By 1737, however, Deer Creek Friends were worshipping in a meetinghouse on three and one-half acres of land purchased, for the sum of 28 pounds sterling, from Nathan Rigbie, the most prominent landowner in the Darlington area. Deer Creek Friends believe this first meetinghouse was probably a modified home or outbuilding bought with the land.

*Text by James E. Pickard  
All photographs by Sue Hunter Woerthwein  
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In 1760, Nottingham Monthly Meeting, Deer Creek's parent group, granted Deer Creek the status of Monthly Meeting "on account of their distance and frequent danger of the [Susquehanna] River." Deer Creek Monthly Meeting held their first session to consider business on "Second Day, Twelfth Month, 1760." They named William Cox, a Friend originally from Pardshaw Hall Monthly meeting in Cumberland County in "Old England," clerk of the meeting. The Monthly Meeting also named Joseph Hopkins, John Talbot, and William Cox as their first Overseers.

Deer Creek Friends Monthly Meeting now consists of only one meeting, but in the practice of earlier Friends, it once had several preparative meetings in its care. In 1760, it consisted of the preparative meetings of Bush River and Deer Creek. Later, in the 1700s, a meeting called Fawn (later Fawn Grove) in Pennsylvania was added to the Monthly Meeting's care, and finally in the 1800s, so was a meeting called Broad Creek in the Scarboro area. However, the entire settlement of Bush River has disappeared, and the meetinghouse at Fawn Grove was sold. In the 1950s, Friends laid down Broad Creek and dismantled the meetinghouse.

### History of the Meetinghouses

The first meetinghouse became abandoned after approximately 30 years because it appeared "considerably decay'd" and "not Sufficient to contain its Members." Friends appointed Joseph Hopkins, a joiner by trade, to engineer the construction of the new meetinghouse, which began in 1765 and completed sometime later. Deer Creek's oral history suggests that, unfortunately, in 1784, arsonists burned this meetinghouse to the ground, probably because of the meeting's stance against slavery.

Thanks to financial aid from almost all of the meetings from the Western Quarterly Meeting region, of which Deer Creek Monthly meeting was a part, a third meetinghouse was constructed across the road from the previous one. Deer Creek Friends worship in this building today. In 1888, Hugh Jewett, a wealthy member of the congregation, paid for the general refurbishment of the building. In 2000, the meeting began construction on a beautiful new addition to provide better quarters for its growing Sunday School and a larger dining area for hospitality. The poplar benches in the meeting room are more than 200 years old, and tradition holds that they were rescued from the fire of 1784.



*Meeting house interior with author's chair. Architectural features like wall panels are as refurbished in 1888.*

### Deer Creek Struggles with Slavery

In 1769, Baltimore Yearly Meeting approved a minute forbidding the sale of slaves and, later, they produced another minute which required the freeing of all slaves held by Friends. As would be expected, this stance presented a problem for Deer Creek, as many of its prominent members were large landholders who owned slaves. Nonetheless, despite almost constant prodding by the Quarterly and Yearly Meetings, Deer Creek slowly but successfully dealt with the issue without disowning offending members wholesale.

By about 1800, all Deer Creek members had freed their slaves entirely. In addition, several Deer Creek Friends participated in the Underground Railroad and risked life, liberty, and property to aid runaways in their quest for freedom. The meeting also conducted many "Meetings for Worship for Negroes," which were well attended. In 1779, the meeting formed a Committee for the Oversight of Manumitted Slaves in order to protect freed blacks from being kidnapped and resold into slavery; in this instance, the freed men and women became wards of the meeting, which helped ensure they would not be returned to slave labor.

In 1796, Silas Warner submitted a report to the meeting on behalf of the Trustees of the School for Black Children. Establishing this school took courage, as educating blacks of any age was frowned upon in slaveholding states. Therefore, while Deer Creek's record on slavery is not without reproach, its members largely were leagues ahead of most of their neighbors on this important social and moral issue.

### The Quietist Period

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Deer Creek Meeting expended much of its energy on what would be regarded today as trivial matters. Maintaining the Discipline became a primary focus. The Monthly Meeting elders (i.e., admonished or offered corrective guidance) and even disowned members for such misdemeanors as dancing, playing cards, cursing, and marrying out of meeting. A few examples follow:

- John Pain "has married a Woman not of our Society by a Priest, notwithstanding he was precautioned."
- Thomas Saunders "hath by keeping Unprofitable Company been induced to dance with them."
- Skipwith Coale has used "very unbecoming Language even to Cursing or swearing."
- "Edward Wallis hath been guilty of disorderly Conduct and been concerned in some Frays or Brawls and used gross unbecoming Language and [is] accused of cursing or Swearing."