

A BRIEF HISTORY OF QUAKERS IN SOUTHEASTERN USA

Formally incorporated in 1964 as Southeastern Yearly Meeting, Quakers in the southeast U.S. have a long and colorful history in the area. Seventeenth-century spiritual leader George Fox almost visited the future SEYM as he traveled past Spanish-claimed Florida and the Georgia coastlines on his way from Barbados to Philadelphia.

Quakers settled in Charleston, South Carolina as early as 1657, with meeting records dating from the 1680's. Mary Fisher, one of the Valiant Sixty (the first 60 or more Quaker ministers who were convinced by Fox and spread the Quaker message worldwide) and who, c. 1660, traveled mostly by herself to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, ministering in the Light to the Grand Turk, was honored by him and allowed to return home; in later years she came to Charleston and was married and eventually buried at the Charleston meetinghouse c. 1690. The Charleston Meeting was laid down in 1837 after having been burned down twice by the slave-holding citizens in the area, thus causing most of the Quakers to migrate to more friendly environments to the north and west.

In 1696, Quaker Jonathan Dickinson, for whom the Florida state park is named, was shipwrecked near Jupiter Inlet in Florida and wrote a journal of his experiences over the year while he waited for the next ship coming by to rescue him and his party. Nearly seventy-five years later, the Quaker botanist William Bartram, inspired by Dickinson's journal, traveled extensively in the southeast, studying Florida and Georgia flora. He is perhaps the first Friend to witness the fury of a Florida hurricane, c. 1773. He also wrote that in 1793 he visited a Friends meeting near the town of Wrightsborough, (in the vicinity of modern day Augusta, Georgia), that had formed

c. 1755. By 1807, those Friends, opposed to slavery, had laid down their meeting and migrated northwest to Ohio, Indiana, or Illinois.

In the nineteenth century, the first influx of Friends in Florida arrived in Alachua County from Indiana, Nebraska and Iowa. The first Florida meetinghouse was built by Whitewater Meeting (1884-1897) near Archer, under the care of Richmond Monthly Meeting, Indiana. During the same time period, Lake Kerr Friends, having migrated from Michigan, Ohio, and London, England, started the first Friends elementary school in Florida. They sent their high school youth to Westtown Friends School near Philadelphia. The "Big Freeze" of 1892-1893 wiped out both of these Friends communities of orange grove owners. Those Friends sold their land and moved back up north.

Contemporary Quaker history commences in 1893 when the railroad transported the first Quaker farmers to Miami from the northeast. The Quaker community there waxed and waned, finally becoming firmly established in 1948 and, under the care of Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC), became a Monthly Meeting in 1950. Meanwhile, since about 1900, Friends had been moving to Orlando from the New Jersey and Philadelphia monthly meetings and had established a preparative meeting under the care of Moorestown Monthly Meeting in New Jersey. They became a monthly meeting in 1944 under the care of FWCC. In 1917, St. Petersburg Friends organized and have met regularly since. They, too, became a recognized monthly meeting under the care of FWCC and built Florida's first continuously used meetinghouse. Due to very poor roads and no direct transportation, there was little contact among these early Florida Friends until the late 1940s.

During World War II, a conscientious objector camp was set up near Orlando in 1942. After the war, many of the COs moved their families down to Florida which helped establish new Friends meetings.

By 1950, Friends were encouraged by American Friends Service Committee and Friends General Conference Field Secretary

J. Barnard Walton to organize further. Thus the Southeastern Conference of the Religious Society of Friends was formed. Later during the 1962 conference, it was recorded that “Seven Meetings of the Southeastern Friends Conference having indicated by official Minutes their desire to assume Yearly Meeting status, the Planning Committee recommends that these Meetings now consider themselves the Southeastern Yearly Meeting [of The Religious Society of Friends] . . .” These seven monthly meetings were Augusta, Georgia, and Florida meetings in Gainesville, Jacksonville, Miami, Orlando, Palm Beach, and St. Petersburg.

The first full sessions of Southeastern Yearly Meeting were held April 12, 1963 near Avon Park, Florida. J. Barnard Walton (Friends General Conference, 1915-1963) was instrumental in shepherding the conference from its inception in 1950 to this conclusion. In recognition of his support, the annual yearly business meeting Saturday-night lecture series was named the J. Barnard Walton Memorial Lecture.

SEYM meetings continue to grow and wane as population centers evolve. One decade into the twenty-first century, twenty-five meetings and worship groups are affiliated with or have a relationship with SEYM. In addition to the larger annual gathering/business meeting, SEYM supports two annual interim business meetings. Following the winter interim business meeting, the Dwight and Ardis Michener Memorial Lecture, begun in 1971, is held at the Orlando meetinghouse. The Walton and Michener lectures are published annually to share the experience with the wider Quaker fellowship. Also, SEYM is noted for assisting in the founding and continued support of ProNica.

