

# Quakers Know Prisons from the Inside Out

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From 1650 Quakers were imprisoned as they followed their leadings. Their crimes were blasphemy, public speaking, refusal to swear oaths, and disturbing the peace, among other distressing behaviors. By 1659, twenty-one Quakers had died in prison due to ill treatment, while countless others were crippled or their health had been permanently damaged.

Why did the Quakers become interested in jail reform? It has been estimated that 15000 British Friends were persecuted for their faith in the period from the beginning of the Society in 1652 to the beginning of freedom of worship in 1687-9. This is about 1 in 3 of all Quakers of that time. The statistics are eloquent. In 1658 there were just 119 Quaker prisoners in all of England. In 1660, in just 2 months, 535 Friends from York and Yorkshire were imprisoned. 120 Friends, from one meeting in Gloucester, were arrested on a single day in 1661.

By the end of January 1660, jails across the country were filled with them. From one town to another the story was the same: of Quakers detained in fetid prisons and moldering detention rooms in appalling, sometimes fatal conditions. More than 4,000 men were incarcerated - including 500 in London, 400 in Yorkshire and almost 300 in Lancashire -- and women and children were not exempt from these miseries. In Aylesbury, John Whitehead and Isaac Penington joined sixty or seventy others in an old malt-house 'so decayed that it was scarce fit for a dog-house'. Quakers in Norwich were housed in a recess in the castle wall; one in Dover was thrown into a hole, 'a place very filthy ... overrun with maggots and other insects'. Yet in York, where local Quakers were of 'the better sort', unwilling to antagonise their local business associates and neighbours, their community did not suffer as such.

Within a year of the 1664 Conventicle Act, an Act of the Parliament of England that forbade conventicles, defined as religious assemblies of more than five people other than an immediate family, outside the auspices of the Church of England, a total of 2100 Quakers were arrested from just five London meetings.

During these years the 'Society of Friends' (Quakers) was 'the most vilified of all the sects', denounced and physically attacked by both the propertied and the poor, in town and country alike. Stories from across the country told of frenzied assaults which in retrospect are hard to comprehend. When James Parnell preached in Colchester he was viciously attacked 'by a blind zealot who struck him a violent Blow with a great Staff, saying There, take that for Christ's Sake.' The first Quaker preachers to arrive in Cambridge were women who were publicly whipped in the market place 'so that their Flesh was miserably cut and torn'. Such acts of parochial violence were often prompted by a dislike of outsiders trying to interfere in local matters. It is easier to understand such feelings in the context of Quakers disrupting church services, burials and the like. Sometimes the offending Quaker seemed to be merely crazy. Solomon Eccles walked through Smithfield in 1663 'with his Body naked, and a Pan of Fire and Brimstone burning on his Head'. He was promptly dispatched to Bridewell house of correction.

The growing hatred for Quakers flared up even when they were going about their normal business. When the Huntingdon shopkeeper Robert Raby and others traded on Christmas Day, they had 'Dirts and Mire cast upon them'. Quakers were also attacked as they worshipped. In Sawbridgeworth, a local 'rabble' threw 'Showers of stones, Dirt, rotten Eggs, human Dung and Urine' into the meeting house. Their hats were filled with dirt and placed back on their heads. After the widow Ann Cock disrupted a service in Cambridge, an angry local tailor threw a 'piss-pot of Urine' at her.

The animosity against Quakers clearly ran deep, for they were described and considered as less than human -- as cannibals, satanists and the like -- a process which allowed their tormentors to punish them in the most violent and bloody fashion. Men were herded

through the streets like cattle, crammed into stinking confinement, beaten, starved and roundly abused. For that first generation of Quakers, these humiliations on a ghastly scale and from all quarters was a regular occurrence.

The severity of these post-1660 persecutions which lasted for more than a decade shaped the course of Quaker history. It was from the violations of these years that their 'peace principle' gradually evolved. Fox declared that 'The spirit of Christ will never move us to fight a war against any man with carnal weapons.' Thereafter Quakers eventually became wedded to this new concept and practice of non-violence. Indeed, many of the features we today associate with Quakerism emerged from this difficult time.

Quaker reform efforts focused at first on the atrocious conditions that were common in prisons and jails. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, in both England and the United States, prisoners were held in large rooms – often 30 to 40 together. Prisoners had to pay fees for their food and for all services, such as unlocking their irons so that they could attend their trial.

The women prisoners that Quaker Elizabeth Fry encountered at Newgate in London had inadequate clothing and bedding for themselves and their small children, who were frequently jailed with them. Fry organized a society to help women prisoners school their children and make their own bedding and clothing.

Prisoners in the pre-trial jail in Philadelphia that Richard Wiston encountered were starving; Wiston brought them soup from home. These early hands-on efforts, which continued for generations, involved daily visits and contact with the prisoners.

In the U.S., in the late 17th and early 18th century, Quaker William Penn's experiment included experiments in criminal justice. In Pennsylvania, the death penalty was abolished for all crimes except pre-meditated murder. Penn introduced the concept of prison labor – which he learned from Dutch prisons; men worked in "rasping houses"

finishing and shaping wood, and women worked in “spin houses” spinning yarn. By 1718, however, English criminal law overrode Penn’s experiment and the death penalty and a wide range of corporal punishments returned as features of criminal law.

It was a Calvinist, though, not a Quaker, who introduced the idea of solitude and silence leading to repentance. John Howard, a prison reformer who traveled throughout Europe, exposed the sordid conditions that Fry and Wiston and many others had witnessed and urged change, focusing especially on hygiene. His ideas took hold among some reformers in Philadelphia, notably Dr. Benjamin Rush, an Episcopalian.

By 1787, Dr. Rush had become a vocal critic of the American interpretation of English criminal law, in which the objective of punishment seemed to be to humiliate a prisoner while imposing hard labor, corporal punishments, and deprivation of food, sleep and other necessities. Dr. Rush, who had been greatly influenced by the writings of John Howard, advocated a different kind of punishment that combined concepts of physical pain, labor, solitude, watchfulness, silence, cleanliness and a simple diet. He recommended remote locations for prisoners, and doors that creaked when they opened and closed with “an echo...that shall deeply pierce the soul.” Though prisons were not built with these features in mind during Dr. Rush’s day, many of those features, including the echoing clang of electronically operated doors, seem to describe modern-day prisons.

Reform efforts took a turn toward theory in the early 19th century. Reacting, most likely, to the inhumanity that came with the continuing practice of crowding prisoners into one room, reformers began to look at separation of prisoners as a preferable condition. In 1790, 16 solitary cells were constructed in the yard of the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia, for “hardened criminals” who could be sent there from anywhere in the state. Other reforms – separating women from men, and debtors and witnesses from convicts, eliminating liquor and paying jailors a regular salary – took care of the most egregious conditions in the jails and prisons.

By 1800, the experiment of mixing populations in the Walnut Street Jail strained the system too much, and the state moved to open the first prison entirely constructed on the theory of solitary confinement – Eastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary -- in 1829. This prison was designed and operated largely under the leadership of Quakers. Though the food and sanitation are reported to be better, prisoners had absolutely no contact with each other and had no activities to engage them. Rules were strict and plentiful and punishments were harsh.

Quakers were not all of one mind about solitary confinement. As the first penitentiary opened here in the U.S., Elizabeth Fry was addressing the British House of Commons in opposition to solitary confinement. Neither the architecture nor the extreme application of this model caught on in the United States. But many of the features of the early penitentiaries, including single cells, discipline, labor, “simple and inferior food”, both fixed and indeterminate sentences, classification of criminals, and even some sense of a hope for rehabilitation, have endured. Reform efforts have modified rather than revolutionized these prisons.

Quakers have continued to be involved in prison visitation, advocacy for shorter sentences and better conditions including the curtailment of solitary confinement, opposition to the death penalty, education in prisons, and assistance for prisoners upon re-entry. The Alternatives to Violence Project, started by Quakers, has been embraced by prison authorities and prisoners across the country as a program that can make a positive difference in prisoners’ lives. Quakers have vigorously opposed the expansion of prisons, the growth of the prison industry, and the dramatic increase of the use of prison as a major response to a range of social challenges. And yet the number of prisoners – and prisons – continues to grow and grow.

In New York Year Meeting Quakers have Quaker Worship or Interfaith Groups in 8 New York State prisons, but members of our Body are incarcerated all over New York, even in prisons where there is no Quaker group.