

## Re-digging the Wells

We will begin by returning to our roots to re-dig our denominational wells. First Friends belongs to the Evangelical Friends denomination, which springs from Quaker roots. Quakers and Friends throughout history have been known for their embrace of the call of Micah 6:8 to “do justly...love mercy, and walk humbly with...God” In particular, our forefathers and foremothers were leaders and outspoken advocates of the abolitionist movement; many were actively involved in leading efforts to end slavery by participating in the underground railroad, especially in Ohio. Many did so at their own peril and cost them and their families dearly, but it did not cost them more than the price their black brothers and sisters had paid to be slaves. Some examples of Quakers and Friends anti-racist efforts follow.

As articulated in an article, “Anti-slavery in Britain” (Quakers, 2020), the anti-slavery movement was influenced greatly by prominent Quakers; although, there were Quakers involved in the slave trade and who owned slaves. In the 1600s in England, George Fox, co-founder of the Friends movement called for slaves to be treated well and to be set free eventually. While we would not agree fully with Fox’s stance of eventual freedom, this was a radical stance in his day. His preaching companion, William Edmundson, condemned slavery out rightly.

John Woolman, an itinerant Friends preacher in America from the 1700s, determined to abolish slavery, carried a message to plantations of the South, boldly preaching equality for all. Woolman also influenced English politicians to take an anti-slavery stance as well. His influence contributed to the formation of a Parliamentary committee called the Society for the Abolition of Slave Trade. English Quakers at that time also initiated an influential anti-slavery literature campaign that flooded the nation. A boycott of sugar plantations with slaves was instituted; this had direct implications on the American South whose plantations supplied sugar to England.

In addition to men, many Quaker women in England joined the anti-slavery efforts and started their own committees and organizations, largely because men would not allow them to participate in men’s organizations. Elizabeth Heyrick and Anne Knight founded the Birmingham Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves. Taking their lead, over 70 more women’s anti-slavery societies sprung up.

Friends women were also highly influential in shaping the abolitionist movement in America. Sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke, who were daughters of a highly influential judge in Charleston, became outspoken leaders and icons of the abolitionist movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott are well-known names of women associated with Quaker/Friends movement who spoke out against slavery and for abolition of slavery. Women were highly influential in seeing slavery ended. Even Abraham Lincoln acknowledged the influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* when he said upon meeting her, “so, you are the little lady who started the Civil War.” Stowe, not a Quaker, was a friend of the Grimke sisters and influenced by Sarah to write her book.

Prior to 1800, more than 60 years before the American Emancipation Proclamation Quakers (Friends) in North Carolina had liberated slaves. During the Civil War, Friends assisted runaway slaves as part of the establishment of the underground railroad, a secret route slaves used to travel to the free North. The Christian conviction, bravery, kindness, and activism of many Quakers led to the eventual abolition of slavery in both Britain and America. We must keep in mind, that while slavery as it once was in the South does not exist today, there are still many forms of slavery in our world today: forced labor, sex trafficking, child-labor, child soldiers, child-pedophilia rings. The church cannot ignore injustice wherever it may be.

While some advances have been made in race relations, much work is needed for the church to become one body, one voice, one bride with many colors, nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples bringing God's Kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. Let us all commit to learning, growing, listening, and reconciling all so that our God's Kingdom will come and His Bride will reign in all her beauty and splendor.

Quakers in the World (2020). Anti-slavery in Britain. Retrieved from <https://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/55/Anti-Slavery-in-Britain>

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