



Quaker Hill Quill

Quaker Hill Historic Preservation Foundation
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Benjamin Ferris: A Friend, Standing on the Watch Tower

by Terence Maguire

Safely tucked away in the archives of Wilmington Friends School library are a number of interesting old books that have been given to the school. One book, a first edition, is worth knowing, as is its writer, Benjamin Ferris.

In 1846 Ferris published:

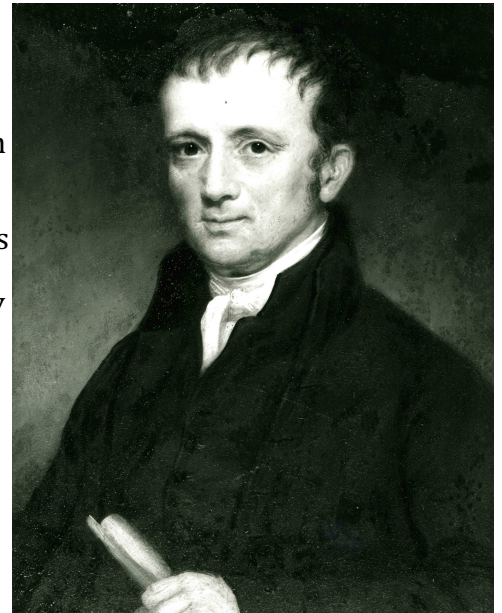
*A History
of the
Original Settlements
on
The Delaware,
from Its Discovery by Hudson
to the
Colonization under William Penn,
to Which is Added
an Account of the Ecclesiastical Affairs
of
the Swedish Settlers,
and
a History of Wilmington,
from Its First Settlements to the Present Time.*

The volume's daunting title was not unique; books of that time often had paragraph-length titles. Its distinction, rather, is that Ferris was "the first citizen of the state, who ever attempted to gather up any portion of its annals," according to Lewis Bush of the Historical Society of Delaware. Our copy is a first edition. It may have been acquired between 1881-1898, when Isaac Johnson was the Principal, because his name is on the inside cover. It may have been given to the school by the author, though, for he was a member of Fourth and West Meeting, and he and his brother Ziba were members of the School Committee—the Board of Trustees, today.

The book is 312 pages, and the style is old-fashioned but lucid. He opens by stating, "As man is the only animal which manifests the least curiosity to know what will be hereafter, so he is equally distinguished by the desire to understand what has passed before he came into the world." Exhaustive in research, it is based on original records preserved in Wilmington, New York, Albany, Philadelphia and Sweden. Ferris also freely

acknowledges that much more could have been done; it was necessary for him "to study brevity," in order to do the work at all.

Original Settlements is a seminal work, the source of so much writing that has followed it, especially since some of the original documents to which he had access are gone. It deals with minute particulars, such as the weekly log of a ship sailing from Sweden in 1642, the winning vote total for first burgess (mayor) that William Shipley received in 1740, the dimensions of the first building of Friends School in 1748.



Benjamin Ferris, member of Wilmington Friends Meeting, wrote a seminal history of the settlement of Delaware

He also shows, however, a deep understanding that one might not have credited to folks of 150 year ago. In discussing the "universal kindness of the aborigines of our country, to their European visitors," Ferris writes:

There is hardly an instance of unprovoked hos-

continued on page 2

In this issue:

- ◆ Benjamin Ferris: A Friend, Standing on the Watch Tower
by Terence Maguire – Page 1
- ◆ Better Angels: Signs of the Times
by Colin Adams-Toomey – Page 3
- ◆ Isaac Flint From Wilmington Friends Meeting Buys
Samuel Burris at the Auction Block –
by Robert Seeley – Page 3
- ◆ Upcoming Events – Page 5



Benjamin Ferris

continued from page 1

tility on the part of our native population...It was not until the natives had severely suffered by the base and gratuitous atrocities of the Caucasian race, or had by undoubted testimony become acquainted with the darker side of our character, that they committed acts of cruelty.." (p.3)

Anyone interested in local history will find this book a deep and rich mine.

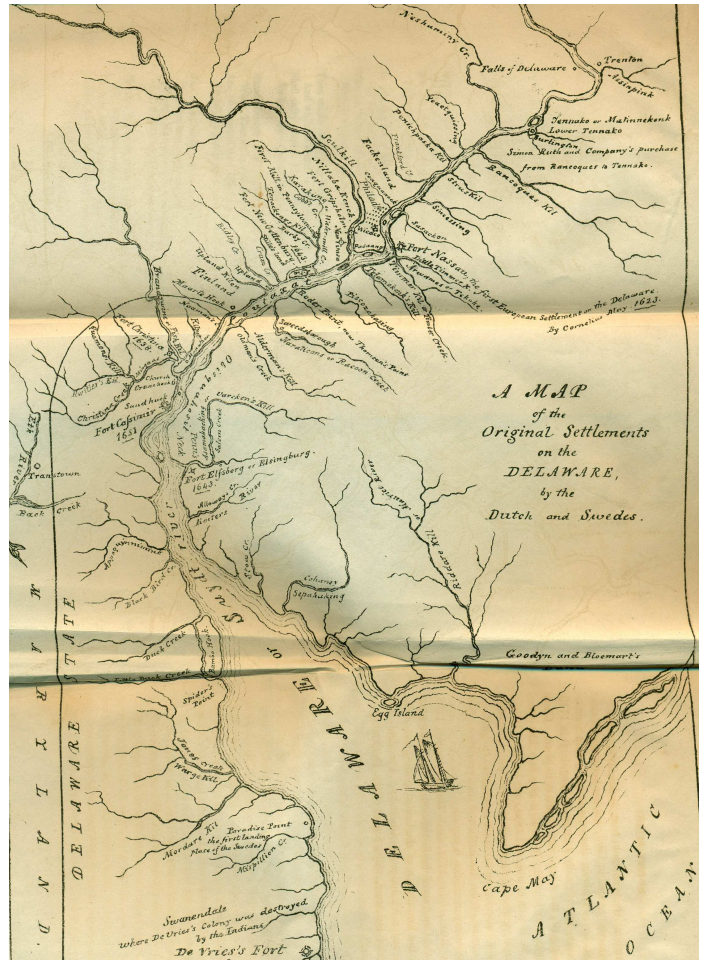
Born in 1780 to his family home at Third and Shipley, Benjamin apprenticed in Philadelphia to be a watchmaker, as his father Ziba was and as his brother became. As a young man Benjamin was quite enthusiastic at first about the French Revolution until he became shocked by the bloody excesses of liberty gone mad. He gave up political interests and watch-making, returning to Wilmington to become a conveyancer, involved with the transfer of deeds. That, and another pro-

profession as city surveyor, from 1820 until he suffered paralysis much later in life, left Benjamin comfortable and able to devote his life to Quakerism, learning and the pursuit of justice.

So seriously did he take the Friends testimony against war

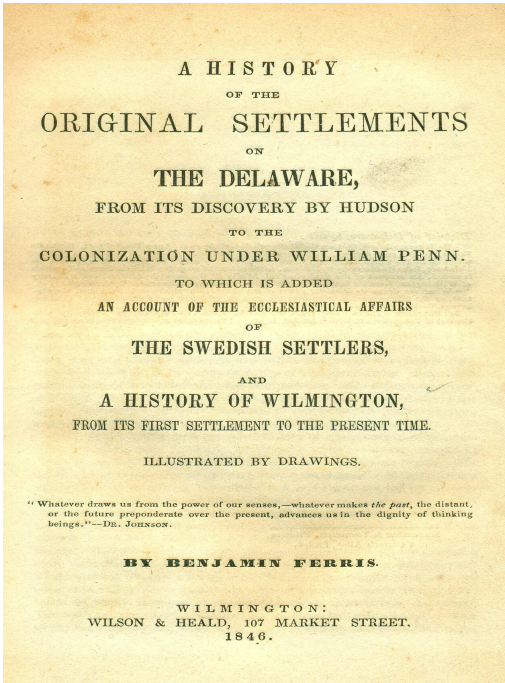
that he would not even vote for a President because each one was Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. He was not against struggle for the right, however. In 1821 he responded to a theologically contentious letter in a local paper from a Presbyterian minister who had signed his name simply as "Paul." Ferris countered these arguments with a learned response, signing it as "Amicus" (Latin for *Friend*), thus initiating a weekly newspaper debate, eagerly followed in Wilmington, which lasted almost two years. True, it is hard to imagine printed theological debate stirring *News Journal* readers, but times have changed.

Perhaps his biggest struggle was on behalf of the Seneca Indians of upper New York state. Friends'

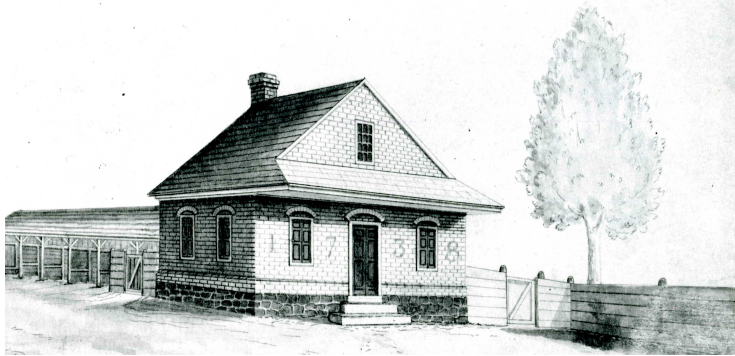


sympathy with a concern for Native Americans goes back to William Penn and earlier, and extends into the present time. In this effort Ferris and other Friends represented the Senecas, whose lands, totaling over 100,000 acres, had been stripped from them by the legal chicanery so typical of 18-19th C America.

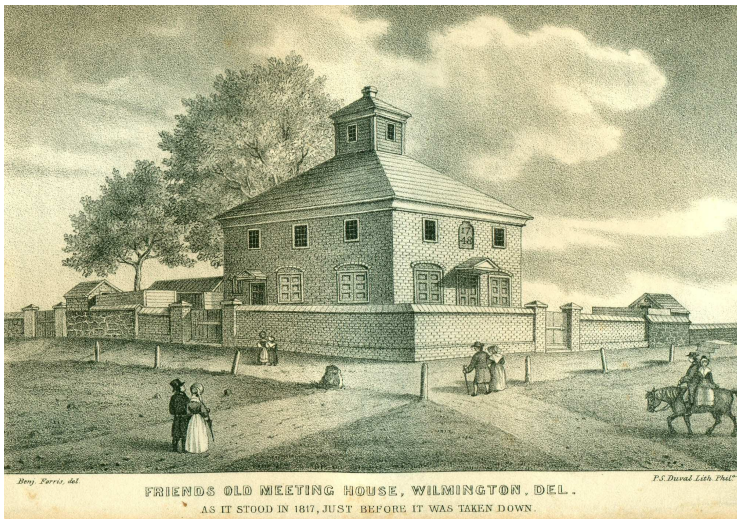
Through unflagging effort and eloquent argument, both public and private, Ferris was able to secure from the federal government and the New York State Legislature, not all, but 53,000 acres of the



Friends first meeting house, and the first place built for Divine worship in the City of Wilmington after it was laid out for a town. This house is not standing, but the Balcony or front porch has been removed about sixty years — B.F. 1mo 1845



ABOVE Ferris wrote, "Friends first meetinghouse and the first place built for divine worship in the city of Wilmington."
BELOW The second meetinghouse, which replaced the first, was constructed in 1748. The sketch is by Benjamin Ferris.



disputed land on behalf of the Senecas.

The character of Ferris may show best in a dispute he lost. A wealthy Philadelphian had left a large portion of his wealth for the education of Black people in Wilmington, most of whom were poor. The benefactor had asked Ferris to act as administrator of the bequest, presumably because of his legal skills and experience on the Wilmington Meeting's School Committee.

However, relatives of the benefactor wanted the bequest overturned. They hired the great Delaware lawyer and later U.S. Senator John Clayton, a long-time friend and admirer of Ferris. Even 150 years ago lawyers knew how to "play the race card." Clayton scared the jury with claims that the education would involve military training and arming of young Black men. Ferris's outraged denials fell on deaf ears; the bequest was overturned.

Afterward Clayton wanted to dine with Ferris, as opposing attorneys often will after a case is settled. Not Ferris. Disgusted by Clayton's trickery and deceit, especially in such a cause —taking money from the many with little and giving it back to the few with much— Ferris declared he could no longer have friendship "with one capable of such baseness." And he did not. Clayton regretted the end of their friendship and declared that "he would rather have forfeited double the \$3000 he received in this case than lose the good will of a man such as Benjamin Ferris."

This opponent of war, politics, and greed seemed almost at war with wrong. He described his ancestors with an ironically military metaphor that says

continued on page 5

Isaac Flint From Wilmington Friends Meeting Buys Samuel Burris at the Auction Block

by Robert Seeley

In Dover, Delaware there was a man named Samuel Burris, a friend of Thomas Garrett, and a conductor on the Underground Railroad. In June of 1847 Samuel Burris was caught for assisting Maria Mathews in her flight to freedom.

Samuel was put in jail for ten to fourteen months before his trial where he was found guilty, and put on the auction block to be sold into slavery. Isaac Flint a member of Wilmington Friends Meeting was given money to buy the freedom of Samuel Burris. Dressed as a slave trader, he examined Samuel Burris from head to toe, as the other traders had done. His hair was examined for lice, his back was examined for scars from the lash, the muscles of his legs and arms were measured, and his mouth was opened to check his teeth. The bidding started and a trader from Baltimore was now the highest bidder. Isaac Flint turned to the trader from Baltimore and gave him money. The bids were checked

and the bill of sale of the "property" went to Isaac Flint. Samuel Burris hung his head, thinking he was no longer free. A few moments passed before Isaac Flint had the bill of sale for his "property". Isaac Flint walked up to Samuel and whispered in his ear that all was right; that he had been bought with abolition gold to save him from slavery. The panic within was replaced with relief and joy. Samuel Burris soon found himself in Philadelphia with his wife and children.

Samuel Burris never again returned to Delaware. He remained in Philadelphia until 1852 when he and his family moved to California. He kept in contact with the Underground Railroad through his friend William Still. After the Civil War ended, Burris worked through the African American churches to raise money to aid free blacks. Samuel Burris died in San Francisco in 1869.

Bob Seeley is a descendant of Thomas Garrett, and a member of the QHHPF Board of Directors



Better Angels: Signs of the Times

by Colin Adams-Toomey

On February 19, 2013 the Delaware Humanities Forum had a celebration of the **Better Angels** theatre project and Delaware's Living History at the Wilmington Friends School. DHF's writer-director Colin Adams-Toomey explained that through **Better Angels** we hope to bring to life for the people of Delaware what it meant to be a Delawarean during the Civil War. This project is in conjunction with the nation looking back on the the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. Esteemed guest speaker Robert Seeley, a living descendant of Delaware's famous Quaker abolitionist Thomas Garrett, shared historic facts, photos, and books. Robert Seeley is an accomplished historian, an authority on Thomas Garrett, and is currently involved in creating a Thomas Garrett museum. Mr. Seeley's invaluable information was a key component in the structure of **Signs of the Times**, the first installment of the **Better Angels** theatre series. The audience was given a chance to view sections, acted out by members of the cast, and ask questions about the construction of the play.

Signs of the Times brings to life the trial of Delaware Quaker abolitionist Thomas Garrett. The play focuses on that 1848 trial of Garrett, who was sued for helping the Hawkins family to escape slavery. Garrett risked everything to help the Hawkinses, and his trial became a moral crossroads for the people of Delaware. Woven into the story of Garrett's trial is the story of the Hawkins family, and the terrible choices they had to face on the road to freedom. Audience involvement forces viewers to ask questions, make decisions, and interact with characters in an attempt to make the information learned more actual and emotionally important. **Signs of the Times** leaves viewers with a deeper understanding of just what it was to be alive during these tumultuous times.

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Consider Becoming A Member—As a Member you will receive many benefits, including invitations to lectures, workshops, and social events, and the satisfaction of knowing you are helping QHHPF be a strong voice for preservation as a means to enhance the economic and cultural health of the city. For more information, go to www.quakerhillhistoric.org & click on "become a member"

Make a Donation—Send a check made out QHHPF to:

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The escaping Hawkins family has made it to the house of Quaker abolitionist John Hunn, who agrees to help them. As they settle into the house, Hunn discovers that their escape on foot through the snow has given one of the sons frostbite. From left to right in the photo: Collins Jones as Chester Hawkins, his brother George Jones as Sam Hawkins Jr., Alex Ford as their mother Emeline Hawkins, and Gbaisay Ngobeh as the father, Samuel Hawkins, and the author playing John Hunn.

The extended run of **Signs of the Times** took place on Saturday March 2 at 2 P.M. and 7 P.M., for the first time in the State House Museum in Dover, Delaware, and Sunday March 3 at 2 P.M. and 7 P.M. in the Court House Museum in New Castle, the location of the original 1848 trial. All four shows were a success with great audience participation and outstanding performances from the cast. The audience at the afternoon show in New

continued on page 6



John Wales (left, played by Terrence Gleeson), the lawyer who defended Garrett, argues the case with James Bayard (right, played by Matt Lovlie), the lawyer who represented the slave owners suing Thomas Garrett. The setting is the New Castle Court House (the original location of Garrett's 1848 trial)

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Quaker Hill Events

Upcoming Lecture: Wilmington African Americans' Public Recognition of Thomas Garrett, 1846 - 1871

On May 11, 2013, local Historian **Peter Dalleo** will speak at the Wilmington Friends Meeting House, 401 North West Street, Wilmington, DE 19801, about his research into instances from 1846 to 1871 of public recognition of Thomas Garrett by Wilmington African Americans for his support of their community.

Quaker Hill Picnic 6/5/13

On Wednesday, June 5, 2013, at 6:00 p.m., the Quaker Hill Historic Preservation Foundation and the Quaker Hill Neighborhood Association will hold its annual picnic on the grounds of the Wilmington Friends Meeting at 401 North West Street, Wilmington, DE 19801. At the picnic the Thomas Garrett award will be given to Former Mayor James Baker and Quaker Hill Resident Sean Reilly. The event is free and open to the public. All are welcome.

Berry Festival-6/2/13

Come one, come all! -to the ever-popular Berry Festival at Wilmington Friends Meeting on Sunday, 6/2/13, from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. at 401 West Street, Wilmington, DE 19801. The event, sponsored by the Meeting's Harmony on the Hill Committee, features music by the Conowingo Boys, bungy-jumping, moon bounce, face-painting, plant sale, non-profit tables, lunch-and lots of berries! The event is free and open to the public! Enjoy an afternoon of fun with your friends and neighbors!

Benjamin Ferris

continued from page 3

much about himself:

I find an ancestry pure and spotless as regards any stain on their moral character. I have no doubt they had the same temptations and the same trials that await us, and will always attend those who succeed us; by standing on the watch tower...they were able to conquer...leaving us an example to follow in their steps.

Few of us who follow in his steps aspire to be "pure and spotless" in all the senses of those words. If, however, we find ourselves as ready as he was to defend the causes of justice and right, and to pursue knowledge with his zeal and his humility, perhaps he would find us worthy company on his watch tower.

Author's note: In addition to *Original Settlements*, readers may wish to read further in *Historical and Biographical Papers, Vol. IV, Historical Society of Delaware, 1909.*

Terence Maguire is a retired Wilmington Friends School teacher, local historian and QHHPF Board Member.



continued from page 4

Castle was predominantly made up of descendants of various characters in the play! We received an overwhelming number of positive evaluations and numerous generous donations.

Red Honors, the next installment of the Better Angels program, will debut in June 2013.

The pictures shown by Mr. Seeley at the event at Wilmington Friends School are now in the museum at Arlington in Upper Darby, Pa.

Colin Adams-Toomey is the playwright of Signs of the Times, a play about Thomas Garrett, part of the Better Angels series of plays



LEFT: Thomas Garrett (played by David Hastings) in the prisoner's dock of the New Castle Court House

RIGHT: Cast of the extended run of the show this past March, plus the descendants of Thomas Garrett who came to see the show! The cast are behind the family, and from left to right, they are: Sean Wagner as the Sympathetic Juror (somewhat behind the pillar), Anna Sodomini as a Spectator, Jake Hunter (dark hair and light-colored vest) as Sheriff Jacob Caulk, David Hastings as Thomas Garrett, George Jones as Sam Hawkins, Jr., Terrence Gleeson as John Wales, Sue Sodomini as Rachel Garrett, Albert Them as Judge Roger Taney, Brock Vickers as Charles Glanding (slave owner), Alex Ford as Emeline Hawkins, Steve Crum as Samuel Hawkins, Sky Bennett as Daniel Wolfe (directly to Steve's left), myself as John Hunn, Brian Weiser as Rodmond Smith, and obscured by the pillar is David Price as the Court Clerk. Sadly I did not catch all of the names of the Garrett family members, but I will give you the ones I have. The woman on the far left is Linda Garrett McDonald, the man to the left with the dark suit and red waistcoat is Bob Seeley, the woman he has his arm around is his sister Mary Seeley, and in the middle, the baby is the newest generation, named Thomas Garrett too! And, he was born on January 25th, the day that the historical Thomas Garrett died!



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