

THE NANTUCKET QUAKERS' MESSAGE AS AN  
ALTERNATIVE TO BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S  
MESSAGE TO THE FRENCH REVOLUTION\*

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Franklin lived in France from 1778 to 1785. He was successful in drawing the country into the American Independence war against Britain in 1778. He became the idol of future French revolutionaries, and remained so even after his death in 1790. The French revolutionaries also admired American Quakers, but they mistook Benjamin Franklin for a Quaker, which he was not.

From 1786, American Quakers from Nantucket settled down in Dunkerque, in France. In February 1791, together with Jean de Marsillac, a French Quaker from Congénies, they brought a petition in favour of a non-violent revolution. But Mirabeau, who was President of the National Assembly, was a great admirer of Benjamin Franklin. He did not take the Quakers' petition seriously, and historians afterwards forgot about this message.

Benjamin Franklin indirectly originated from Nantucket through his mother Abiah Folger. He was a relative of many Nantucket Quakers who went to Dunkerque. So, the two messages brought to France during the French revolution came from Nantucket, directly or indirectly. They are complementary to each other, but the second one still remains to be discovered.

KEY WORDS

Benjamin Franklin, Nantucket, American Revolution, French Revolution, Jean de Marsillac

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We know from Arthur Mekeel's book *The Quakers and the American Revolution* (1996), that Friends were rather reluctant to support the American revolution, and particularly its military side, the War of Independence. We also know that Benjamin Franklin stayed in France from 1776 to 1785, and was successful in drawing France into the American War of Independence from 1778. And when the French Revolution broke out, although Franklin had left France a few years earlier, his ideological influence was quite visible among the revolutionaries. At the same time, Quakers were in vogue in pre-revolutionary France, mainly among artists, intellectuals, and politicians. We may wonder if Benjamin Franklin was the only American ideological influence on the French Revolution. What about the Quaker viewpoint? Was it carried to France during the French Revolution?

### **Benjamin Franklin as Anti-Quaker and Francophobe**

When Benjamin Franklin belonged to the government of Pennsylvania from 1751, he insisted that the Province should declare war on the Indians and French America because they were an obstacle to Pennsylvania's westward expansion. When Friends said that the natives had become aggressive because they had been cheated in land purchase, he answered that punishment was the only language the natives could understand. At the Albany conference in 1754 he drew the cartoon 'Join or die' in order to encourage the British colonies to unite against French America. In Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin had his own way when the province declared war on the Delaware on 12 April 1756, bringing the downfall of William Penn's 'Holy Experiment'. In turn, this war itself brought about the downfall of political French America, so it is rather paradoxical that Benjamin Franklin should have been mistaken for a Quaker when he was in France, since Quakers have a strong pacifist tradition.

Just as Benjamin Franklin had favoured war against French America and the natives in the 1750s, so he favoured war against Britain in the late 1770s, first among the British colonies by siding with the Patriots, then in France after 1776. He was successful in drawing France into the American War of Independence, as mentioned above. So Franklin was mistaken for a Quaker, whereas he had come in order to draw France into a war. And Mirabeau thought extremely highly of the so-called Quaker, whereas he hardly paid attention to the message of the Friends who came before him in flesh and blood and read aloud a petition when

he was President of the National Assembly, in February 1791. These were two Nantucket Friends, William and Benjamin Rotch, and one French Friend, Jean de Marsillac.

### **The Quaker Petition of 1791**

Even though Mirabeau and the other members of the National Assembly did not take the Quaker petition of 1791 very seriously, historians should not underrate its interest, for it connected Pennsylvania's Holy Experiment with Nantucket, and it brought into the French Revolution the spirit of the original Philadelphia (William Penn's) as opposed to that of Philadelphia at the time of the War of Independence, as embodied by Benjamin Franklin. Although this was not noticed at the time in France, this petition witnessed to a non-violent American Revolution hidden by the violent one. What can be said about Quakerism in the two places those who presented the petition came from: Nantucket and France?

### **Quakerism on Nantucket island**

The best source on this topic is *Quaker Nantucket* by Robert Leach and Peter Gow.

Quakerism was officially born on the island of Nantucket in 1708. From this time it grew until it became the dominant religion there. It developed a culture of neutrality during the Franco-British wars, which intensified during the American Revolution. The Friends who had been much attached to the Holy Experiment, and were sad to witness its decline, considered Nantucket as a haven for the extension of this Experiment. During the American Revolution, Philadelphia became quite the opposite of what it had been at first: it shifted from nurturing a non-violent revolution during the Holy Experiment to becoming the brain of the American Revolution based on war. So Nantucket could be considered as an extension of the Holy Experiment by those who cherished such values.

The most influential figure on Nantucket during the American Revolution was William Rotch. He had learnt the art of whaling from his father Joseph, and at the same time was much involved in Quaker life. It was he who confirmed Nantucket in its neutrality, both for religious and commercial reasons, since Britain was a privileged purchaser of Nantucket's whale oil, in peace time. After the War of Independence, Nan-

tucket was ruined, and from 1786 William Rotch and his family with a few other families (about fifty people in all), moved to Dunkerque after Britain had refused them hospitality.

### The Origins of French Quakerism

At the time of the Camisards' war, in the Cévennes, a group of Camisards chose not to use violence, even to defend themselves against Catholic aggression. Their inspiration was very close to that of George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends, but at this time they did not know about British (or, for that matter, American) Friends. Nor did they call themselves Quakers or Friends, of course. Their official name was 'Inspirés du Languedoc', but from 1750 people around them often called them 'couffaires', which, in Provençal, means 'inflated by the Spirit'. They lived mainly in the Vaunage valley (between Nîmes and Montpellier), in Congénies, Sommières, Saint Gilles, Fontanès, Aujargues, Calvisson and Codognan. Throughout the eighteenth century they held silent meetings for worship, with no professional minister, as did Quakers in Britain and the United States at this time, although the Inspirés were ignorant of this for several decades. Since they professed Christian brotherly love, they tried to practice solidarity and a kind of communal ownership. They were mainly small peasants, and lived in a simple way.

The spokesman for the Friends in Congénies was Jean de Marsillac Lecointe, who had been brought up in the French Reformed Church. Jean de Marsillac was a young nobleman from the Nîmes area who had started a military career, but resigned from the army in 1777 after reading Barclay's *Apologia*. He then studied medicine in Montpellier. When he discovered the Inspirés du Languedoc, he found they were close to Quakers as described by Barclay, and he applied for membership of the group in 1783. He then became key in the contacts between William Penn's Holy Experiment and the Inspirés du Languedoc. These contacts blossomed in 1791, as will be explained shortly. But we must first follow important developments between 1783 and 1791.

The year 1785 was a turning point. In this year, the Inspirés du Languedoc officially discovered the British Quakers as brothers. The opportunity for official contacts between British Quakers and the Inspirés du Languedoc came in this year through a Quaker doctor from Falmouth, in Britain. Joseph Fox (who was not related to founder George Fox), was part-owner of two luggers, the *Greyhound* and the *Brilliant*.

When his partners fitted the ships for piracy during the American War of Independence, he protested, but could not prevent them from doing so. The luggers captured two French ships, *L'aimable française* and *L'assurance*, considered as enemies by the British in this war. Joseph Fox claimed his share from his co-owners in order to give it back to the victims. In order to find the victims, he sent his son Edward Fox to Paris. By advertising in the *Gazette de France*, Edward Fox managed to reach the said victims and to compensate them for spoliation. But there was an unforeseen consequence to Edward Fox's advertisement in the *Gazette de France*: since it explained that Joseph Fox was a member of the Religious Society of Friends, and as such could consider no one as his enemy, the Inspirés du Languedoc responded to this by sending Fox a letter which witnessed to the similarities they could see between the Inspirés du Languedoc and the Friends. This was the beginning of official contacts between the Inspirés and the London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

### The Official Birth of French Quakerism

Jean de Marsillac, who had become spokesman for the Languedoc group, was invited to visit Friends in London in the fall of 1785. More visits by Jean de Marsillac to Britain followed, and in 1788 it was decided that Anglo Saxon Friends would visit the Inspirés in Congénies. The visit started on 23 May 1788, when Irish Friends Sarah Grubb and Mary Dudley; John Eliot and Ady Bellamy, from England; and American Friends George and Sarah Dillwyn, arrived in Congénies. They were cordially welcomed by the Inspirés, to whom they gave advice on how to conform more to the discipline of the Religious Society of Friends (plain dressing, not marrying out of the meeting). On 26 May, they invited them to join the Society. A meeting for worship took place, and visiting Friends, together with the Inspirés de la Vaunage, signed a register to commemorate this event.

This, of course, may look like 'micro-history': five Anglo Saxon Friends visiting the small village of Congénies in 1788. However, if we follow up this story, we come across interesting events, for around the same time an American connection took place. In the late 1780s Quaker whalers from Nantucket settled in Dunkerque, in the north of France, and sometime after 1788 met Jean de Marsillac, who was then a French member of the international Religious Society of Friends.

### The Quaker Petition Presented to the French National Assembly in 1791

In 1790 William Rotch, from Nantucket, and Jean de Marsillac, from Congénies, met, and decided to present a petition in favour of a non-violent revolution to the Assemblée Nationale. This they did personally on 10 February 1791, together with William's son, Benjamin. Jean de Marsillac represented Quakers from Congénies who had recently officially joined the Religious Society of Friends, and the Rotches represented the extension of Pennsylvania's Holy Experiment. The three men had been introduced to the Assemblée Nationale by Pierre-Jacques Brisot, l'Abbé Grégoire, and Rabaud-Saint-Etienne who was the son of Jean-Paul Rabaud, a Protestant figure in the Cévennes. The President of the Assemblée Nationale at this time was Mirabeau, who was at the very end of his life. Although he usually said he admired Quakers, he was not much impressed by these Quakers and very little came out of this petition for French Friends. A little more came out of it for French Mennonites, when in 1793 they sent to the Comité de salut public a petition written in the same spirit as the Quaker petition, not even knowing that there were Quakers in France.

It is interesting to note that Mirabeau, who looked down on the Quaker petition, had been a great supporter of Benjamin Franklin when the latter was in France (from 1776 to 1785). When Benjamin Franklin died in 1790, Mirabeau pronounced an extravagant eulogy at the National Assembly on 11 June 1790, and requested the Assembly to wear mourning for three days in his memory.

#### Jean de Marsillac Takes up William Penn's Non-Violent Beliefs

Jean de Marsillac was the French Friend who took up the thread of this non-violent American revolution and, together with William and Benjamin Rotch from Nantucket, extended it to France. It was at this point (1791) that Jean de Marsillac's biography of William Penn was published: *La vie de Guillaume Penn, fondateur de la Pennsylvanie, premier législateur connu des Etats-Unis d'Amérique* (The life of William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, first known legislator of the United States of America). This was the first French biography of the founder of Pennsylvania, and author Jean de Marsillac mentioned for himself the following titles:

'Docteur en Médecine, Député extraordinaire des Amis de France à l'Assemblée Nationale' (Doctor of Medicine, Extraordinary Representative of French Friends at the National Assembly). By writing this book, Jean de Marsillac contributed to balancing Benjamin Franklin's prestige in France, by drawing attention to another hero. Benjamin Franklin was an adoptive Philadelphian. William Penn was the founder of Philadelphia as well as of Pennsylvania. So, thanks to Jean de Marsillac, William Penn's spiritual legacy was present in France during the French Revolution, as well as Benjamin Franklin's ideological legacy.

Regarding the different messages left in France by the American Revolution via Benjamin Franklin on the one hand and the spiritual heirs to William Penn, Jean de Marsillac and the Rotches from Nantucket on the other, matters are not as clear-cut as one might at first think, nor are the two messages foreign to each other. It is true that Franklin played on the Quakers' good reputation in France in the pre-revolutionary period in order to improve his image, but although he himself was not a Friend, he had Quaker connections in his family, in particular in Nantucket. His maternal grandfather, Peter Folger, who had been a key figure in the British settlement of the island, was the spiritual father of Nantucket Quakerism. Many descendants of Peter Folger who had stayed on the island had become active Friends there. And Benjamin Rotch, who had accompanied his father to the National Assembly on 10 February 1791 to plead for a non-violent revolution on the lines of William Penn's Holy Experiment, was a distant cousin of Benjamin Franklin.

Indeed, Love Macy, the grandmother of Benjamin Rotch, was second cousin to the children of Peter Folger Junior, the grandson of Peter Folger Senior, and first cousin to Benjamin Franklin. On the Barney side (the family of Benjamin Rotch), one can also find kinship with Benjamin Franklin. Jethro Starbuck, the son of Nathaniel Starbuck and Mary Coffin, married Dorcas Gayer. The couple's grand-daughter, Lydia Starbuck, married Benjamin Barney, and their grand-daughter, Elizabeth Barney, married William Rotch and became the mother of Benjamin Rotch. Another son, young Nathaniel, the brother of Jethro Starbuck, was the father of Mary Starbuck, who married Jethro Folger (first cousin of Benjamin Franklin, and uncle to Elizabeth Barney)... So, Elizabeth Barney, mother of Benjamin Rotch, was second cousin to the children of Jethro Folger and Mary Starbuck. But Jethro Folger was first cousin to Benjamin Franklin.

So, at least on two accounts, the two Benjamins, who represented

two different styles of revolutions violent and non-violent, were akin. But the violent revolution was presented in the guise of the non-violent one, and Mirabeau was blind to the difference between them. Mirabeau's delusion is revealing of the ideology that has been dominant in France ever since the French Revolution. Franklin has been a hero in France for two hundred years; meanwhile, his distant cousins from Nantucket, the Rotch family, and the Quaker group from Congénies, have almost fallen into oblivion.

In France, research on the Nantucket Quakers' presence in Dunkerque has been mainly carried out by Thierry Du Pasquier and is presented in his book *Les baleiniers français de Louis XVI à Napoleon* (1990), while the history of Congénies has been narrated by Henry van Etten. Quakerism in Congénies died out at the end of the nineteenth century, owing to intermarriage with neighbouring Protestant families. It is being revived now. A meeting for worship takes place every other week in the house of Françoise and Dennis Tomlin, and the Quaker meeting house has just been bought by a British Quaker couple, the Browns, who want to turn it into a very lively place.

So maybe the spirit of the Holy Experiment, of Nantucket Quakerism and Congénies is not dead in France, but is blowing now in Congénies. The Quaker message to the French revolution, different from that of Benjamin Franklin, did after all survive two centuries of quasi oblivion.

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