



Happy Birthday John Wilbur!

On July 17, 1774, John Wilbur, was born to Quaker parents in Hopkinton, Rhode Island. Wilbur, a Quaker minister and religious thinker was acknowledged a minister in 1812, and appointed an elder at Westerly Meeting in 1802 at the age of 28. He was the teacher of the local Friends school for many years.

In 1822, Wilbur was appointed to an important committee of N. w England Friends to investigate the "new light" movement in Lynn, Massachusetts. Wilbur felt that this group of Friends was abandoning the traditional Friends practice of following God's immediate, inward guidance in favor of using their own reason to interpret and follow the Bible. They were stressing a cold intellectual acceptance of the Bible instead of a vital, direct experience of the Holy Spirit in one's heart. Wilbur quoted early Friends, such as Robert Barclay, William Penn, and George Fox to make his case that the traditional view of Friends was that the inward light takes priority over the text of the Bible. At the same time, he agreed that the Bible was inspired by God and was useful as a guide, as had the early Friends.

The original Quaker meetinghouse was built in Hopkinton, although it was the northern part of Westerly at the time, in the year 1742. The building was on Kuehn Road, which is now in the town of Hopkinton,

where the Quaker burial ground is still located. John Wilbur's farm and property was just north of the meetinghouse property, which leads us to believe that the meetinghouse and burial ground property might originally have been in the Wilbur family.

The Westerly meetinghouse built at Dunns Corners the same year, fell out of use around the time of the Revolution, and was considered derelict by 1800. So Friends

from Westerly would travel by carriage to Hopkinton to worship through the first half of the 19th century. These Friends were Perrys and Fosters and Buffums. At the time they were all part of South Kingstown Monthly Meeting, and Hopkinton was one of the preparative meetings.

In the 1840s, Joseph John Guerney visited the US from England and had a major effect as a charismatic Quaker leading Friends to a more evangelical (a more contemporary) way of looking at the Quaker faith. Wilbur, a gifted minister in his own right, but sort of country and old-fashioned, began touring to where Guerney was speaking to rail against this change from traditional Quakerism.

The "powers-that-be" did not appreciate or condone Wilbur's actions and told him to stop. He did not. So they told the South Kingstown Monthly Meeting to disown him. They did not. So they told the Rhode Island Quarterly Meeting to dissolve the South Kingstown Meeting and to add all of the South Kingstown members to membership in Greenwich Monthly Meeting. Which they did; and then Greenwich Monthly Meeting disowned Wilbur.

At the next Yearly Meeting in 1845, a schism took place in which those who supported Wilbur and the traditionalist view of Quakerism, known as "Orthodox" or "conservative", became New England Yearly Meeting, and the larger group, who supported Guerney's more contemporary evangelical view, became the Yearly Meeting of Friends for New England. In the legal struggle that ensued, the meetinghouse in Hopkinton was awarded to the Guerneyites -- Collins being the most important family name locally. And so Wilburite Friends in Hopkinton and Westerly, still called South Kingstown Monthly Meeting, began meeting in Westerly at the Perry family home which is located, across the street from our present meeting house on Elm Street in Westerly.

In 1879 the new meetinghouse was built in Westerly on property belonging to the Perry family. Named as the South Kingstown Monthly Meeting until 1945 when a unification of the disparate parts of Quakers in New England took place. At that time, the meeting changed it's name to Westerly Monthly Meeting of Friends.

John Wilbur died, May 1, 1856 at the age of 82. He is buried in the Quaker cemetery, on Kuehn Rd. In Hopkinton, Rhode Island.

*Credit NEYM's Facebook post, July 17, 2024.*