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Friends In The Delaware Valley

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by Christopher Densmore

The Society of Friends originated in Great Britain in the 1640s and 1650s, a period of religious and political turmoil. Quakers were one of a number of religious groups that challenged the authority of the Anglican Church. As dissenters from the dominant culture of the time, Quakers suffered persecution, fines and imprisonment in Britain until the Act of Toleration of 1689, and some legal restrictions against Friends in England were not lifted until the mid-19th century.

Traveling Friends reached the North American colonies in the mid-1650s, making converts among religious dissenters in New England, New York, Maryland, and Virginia. The first yearly meeting in North America was organized at Newport, Rhode Island, in 1671. In 1674, English Quaker proprietors purchased the territory of West Jersey, and Quaker settlements were begun at Salem in 1675 and at Burlington, in 1677. The success of the New Jersey ventures encouraged William Penn to form a colony of his own, and he subsequently obtained a charter for Pennsylvania in 1681.

The religious freedom and generous land policy Penn established for Pennsylvania attracted Quakers and other English, Welsh, Irish, and German settlers in large numbers. While many Quakers settled in Philadelphia, others spread out over the rich agricultural farmland of southeastern Pennsylvania quickly forming both city and rural monthly meetings. Philadelphia became the hub of a major area of Quaker settlement, with local Quakers founding schools, hospitals, almshouses, and other institutions for the education and welfare of the population. Though a minority of the population, Quakers were the majority of the government of Pennsylvania, remaining so until 1756 when an unwillingness to appropriate funds for war with the Native Americans and a bounty on Indian scalps led most Quakers to withdraw from the Pennsylvania legislature.

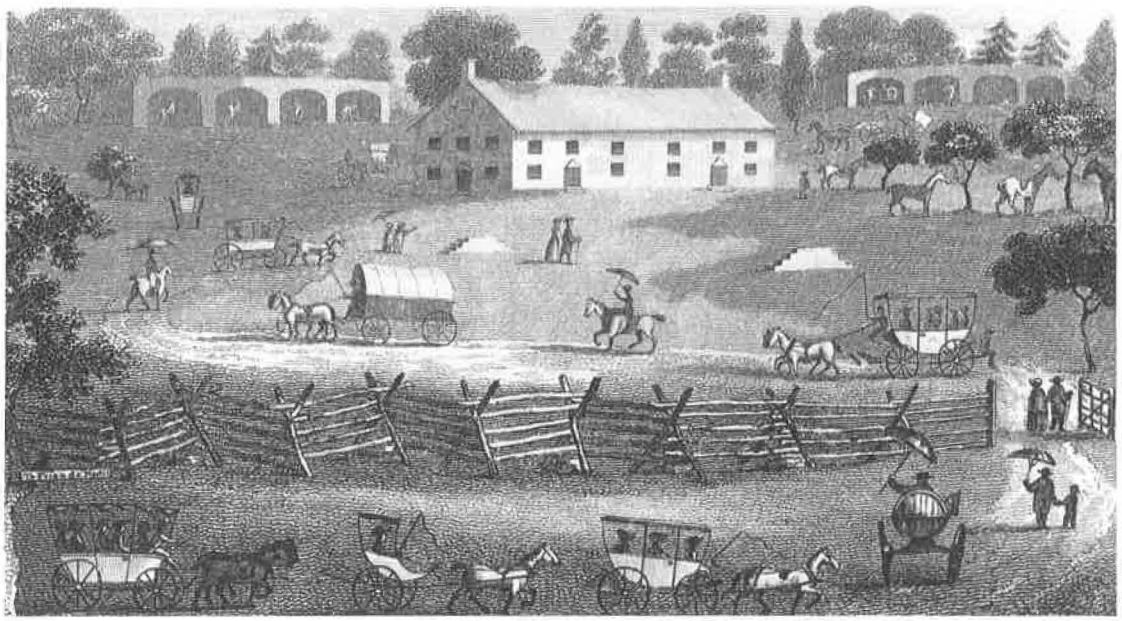
William Penn. (Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.)

Within the Society of Friends, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was often considered the most influential of the yearly meetings outside of the original London Yearly Meeting. Though yearly meetings are independent of one another, Quakers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean were tied together by the visits of Friends traveling in the ministry, by the epistles exchanged by the yearly meetings, and by a shared literature. A Friend in rural Pennsylvania in the 1750s might have more awareness of the developments within the Quaker community in New or old England than she would have of non-Quakers in the next county. Quakers were set apart from the wider culture by their many testimonies, notably their pacifism, and, by the mid-18th century, their opposition to slavery. Quaker testimonies on plainness were marked by plain dress, plain speech, and simple architecture.

Quakers in Pennsylvania were remarkably unified in belief and behavior during the 17th and 18th centuries. There had been a minor controversy with the followers of George Keith in the 1690s, and some Friends left the Society to fight for the American Revolution; a few of them formed the Free Quakers. In the early 1700s, the Quaker Reformation began a period of strict adherence to the discipline of the Society of Friends and a willingness to disown from membership those who deviated from the Quaker way by joining the military, attending "places of diversion," or marrying non-Quakers. In 1688, Friends in Germantown prepared a protest against slavery. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting advised its members against the slave trade as early as 1696, and by the 1750s, led by Quaker reformers, including John Woolman (1720–1772) of Mt. Holly (NJ), and Philadelphia educator Anthony Benezet (1713–1784), the yearly meeting voiced its condemnation of the practice of owning slaves. The final step came in 1776, when Philadelphia Yearly Meeting required that any Friend who did not accept the yearly meeting's admonition to liberate his or her slaves would be disowned.

The unity that marked 18th-century Quakers fragmented in the early 19th century. By 1820, disagreements among Friends about evangelical theology and the role of ministers and elders in the affairs of the Society led to factionalism. The sense of fragmentation may have been heightened by social and economic differences between urban and rural Friends. In 1827, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting divided into "Hicksite" and "Orthodox" branches, and the division traveled outward to all of the local meetings and beyond the

Lucretia Mott. (Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.)



Abington (Hicksite) Meetinghouse. (Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.)

boundaries of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to the other Quaker bodies in North America. In many places where one meeting had been, there would be two bodies both claiming to be part of the authentic Society of Friends. Generally the numerically stronger party retained the old meetinghouse, and the other side built a new one in the vicinity of the old meeting. The yearly meeting boarding school at Westtown remained in the hands of the Orthodox, while the Hicksites built George School. The Orthodox created Haverford College in 1833, and the Hicksites chartered Swarthmore College in 1864. To those outside the Society of Friends, there would be little in the appearance or lifestyle to distinguish the one side from the other. In the 1840s and 1850s, the Orthodox Friends were further divided into Wilburite/Conservative and Gurneyite/Evangelical camps, though within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting the division of sentiment did not result in an actual separation in the yearly meeting as it did elsewhere in North America. In the 1850s, some Hicksites left their branch of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to form the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends. The revival movement of the 1870s, strong among Midwestern, New York, and North Carolina Friends, had little impact in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Quakers of the 18th and early 19th centuries tended to emphasize Friends' distinctiveness from the wider society, shown in visible ways by plain dress and the simple style of the meetinghouse, and in personal behavior by adherence to social testimonies of pacifism, temperance, and antislavery. In their own eyes Quakers were supposed to be a "peculiar"—meaning distinctive—people, and much concern was taken for the guarded education and upbringing of its members so they did not fall prey to the corrupt practices of the world's people. In the 19th century, some prominent Friends exemplified by James and Lucretia Mott, following the lead of Woolman and Benezet, felt that the proper application of Quaker testimonies concerning antislavery, peace, the equal treatment of women, and temperance required an active engagement in the world. Strict adherence to standards of dress was not important; active benevolence was.

By the later 19th century, Friends in both branches of Philadelphia were cooperating with each other on social issues. The establishment of American Friends Service Committee during World War I brought Hicksites and Orthodox, Wilburites and Gurneyites together in common causes. By 1920, and for some Friends well before, there was a growing feeling that the old divisions between Hicksite and Orthodox were not relevant to modern times. A gradual process of reuniting Quaker meetings, and cooperating in Quaker institutions, led to the final reunion of the two branches of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1955.

No organization remains static. Despite the continuing influence among Friends of the example and writings of the first generation of Quakers, particularly George Fox, and on the later examples of John Woolman and Lucretia Mott, both of them members of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the interpretation of Quaker beliefs and testimonies changed over time. In the early 19th century, Quaker plainness was represented by a distinctive form of dress; by the 20th century, few Quakers wore such distinctive dress although most contemporary Quakers avoid ostentation and ornamentation in clothing. In much of the 18th and 19th century, Quaker testimonies, for many Friends, meant a clear separation from "the world," where for contemporary Friends those same testimonies require an active engagement in the world.

Historic American Buildings Survey Recording of Friends Meetinghouses within the Region of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

by Catherine C. Lavoie

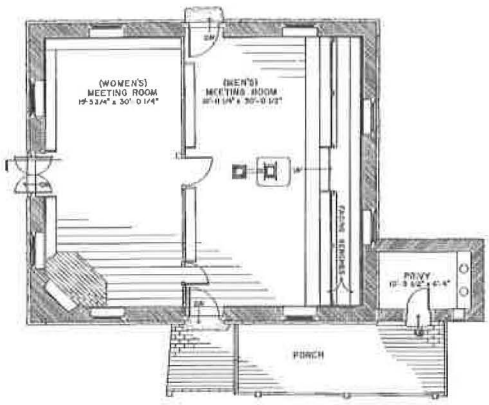
From the founding of the Religious Society of Friends in 1652 until the passage of the 1689 Act of Toleration, Friends in England were unable to worship openly without fear of reprisal. Consequently, the followers of George Fox, founder of the Quaker movement, had been forced to meet in houses, barns, and other buildings adapted for use as meeting places. Only rarely did English Friends attempt to build a structure for the explicit purpose of holding Quaker worship prior to the 1690s. Many traveling Quaker ministers preferred open-air meetings. And even once free to build meetinghouses, the practice of adapting cottages or other preexisting buildings often persisted. Friends began immigrating to New Jersey in the 1670s and to the Pennsylvania colony in 1681. The religious toleration guaranteed by William Penn in Pennsylvania permitted Friends the freedom to pursue their beliefs and to develop building forms conducive to their silent meeting for worship, and separate men's and women's business meetings. The variety of meetinghouse forms produced during the period of early settlement in the Delaware Valley speaks to both their freedom and the lack of prescribed standards for meetinghouse design. Early Quaker settlers adhered to a pattern for these meetings established in England that would inform the plan of their meetinghouses. However, given the autonomy to experiment with meeting practice as well as building design, the colonial Friends eventually deviated from English meeting practice. This only served to further facilitate the development of their own distinct building forms. American Friends meetinghouse designs continued to evolve over the course of time to adapt to changing patterns of Quaker faith and practice. Today over 150 meetinghouses historically associated with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) still stand, several in near-original condition. Ranging in date from as early as 1695 to as late as the 1970s, they present an unparalleled opportunity to document the evolution of an important American building type.

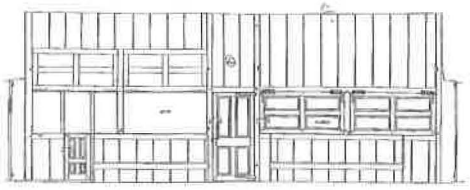
Detail of window at the south front facade of Radnor Meetinghouse. (Jack E. Boucher, photographer, 1998.)

Despite the significance of the meetinghouse architecture in the PYM region and the availability of primary research materials located at repositories such as Swarthmore College's Friends Historical Library and Haverford College's Quaker Collection, very little has been written on the topic. Most interpreters of Quaker history have focused on the impact of Friends religious beliefs upon social ills, motivating Friends to effect change through good works and the establishment of reforming institutions. It was not until 1996 that Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service recognized that a comprehensive study was needed to identify and selectively record Friends meetinghouse architecture of this region and provide the context for its evaluation and interpretation. Beyond the academic usefulness, it was hoped that the study would create awareness of the historical and architectural value of meetinghouses and promote their preservation.

The information presented here represents the culmination of a multi-year effort undertaken by HABS to record the architecture of Friends meetinghouses within the Delaware Valley and its environs. The study encompassed the area under the care of PYM whose constituent meetings extend throughout eastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, and southern New Jersey. As the centers of Quaker religious and social life, the meetinghouses are crucial to the understanding of the Quaker experience and the importance placed upon community. As artifacts of the built environment, the meetinghouses serve as tangible reminders of the vast contributions of Friends to the history and development of the Delaware Valley. The meetinghouses are often well-preserved and so provide an important venue for studying the area's early vernacular architecture. But perhaps most intriguing, taken as a group, the meetinghouses survive as physical manifestations of the changing expressions of Quaker faith and practice over the course of three centuries.

The HABS study began with a field survey of Friends meetinghouses located within the greater Philadelphia area to include Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties in Pennsylvania. The survey identified the essential elements of meetinghouses and, along with preliminary research, recorded historical data such as construction dates, accounts of prior meetinghouses on the site, and monthly/quarterly meeting associations. The survey located over eighty extant meetinghouses. The information was compiled





Of the meetinghouses in the Delaware Valley, the plan of Chichester Meetinghouse comes closest to that of English meetinghouses. However, its symmetrical, single-cell exterior was particular to colonial designs. (Adam Maksay, Kevin J. Lam, and Roger S. Miller, delineators, 1997.)

Drawing of the retractable wood paneled partition at Chichester Meetinghouse. The partition that divided the meetinghouse into separate men's and women's meeting rooms was an essential design feature. (Roger S. Miller, delineator, 1997.)

and examined both chronologically and by region or quarter to reveal specific types, periods, and patterns of meetinghouse development. Representative meetinghouse forms were then selected for HABS recording based upon architectural integrity and their ability to exemplify a particular stage in the evolution of Friends meetinghouse design from the earliest immigrations to modern times. In the summer of 1997, a field team of architectural technicians working under the direction of HABS architects, the survey historians, and the HABS photographer, produced measured drawings, written histories, and large format photographs of the first six meetinghouses, those of Merion (ca. 1695–1714), Radnor (1718), Buckingham (1768), Chichester (1769), Caln (1726, rebuilt 1782), and West Grove (1903).

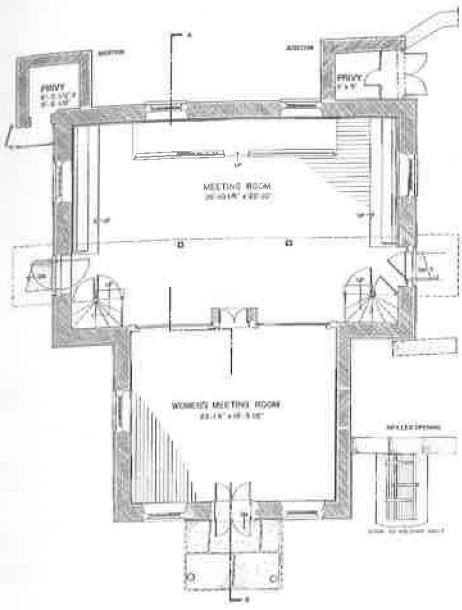
HABS returned to the field during the Spring of 1999 to expand the scope of the survey. Recognizing that Quaker culture and the influence of PYM extended beyond Philadelphia and the counties immediately surrounding it, the second phase of the field survey included structures built by meetings in other areas of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey. Altogether, approximately 150 meetinghouses were examined. With matching funds from the William Penn Foundation, a second team was fielded during the summer of 1999 for recording the meetinghouses at Sadsbury (ca. 1747), Frankford (1775), Arney's Mount (1775), Downingtown (1806), Little Egg Harbor (1863), Germantown (1869), Middletown (remodeled 1888), and Southampton (1969). In an effort to round out the selection, large-format photography and short historical reports were also prepared for Plymouth (1708), Old Kennett (ca. 1731), Bradford (1765), Roaring Creek (1796), Arch Street (1804), Darby (1805), Upper Providence (1828), New West Grove (1831), Abington Orthodox (1836), Race Street (1857), West Philadelphia (1901), Westtown (1923), and Chestnut Hill (1931) meetinghouses.[1]

Although Friends arriving in Pennsylvania in the 1680s brought with them no specific models of meetinghouse design, they did bring ideas about Quaker practice and about building traditions developed in England that would influence their approach to design. Like their English counterparts, colonial Quakers rejected the elaborate ornamentation and iconography of Anglican churches in favor of the plainness dictated by the tenet of simplicity. Therefore, it is less important to define meetinghouses in terms of prescribed architectural styles. Building *design* was more clearly driven by the use of indigenous materials and the vernacular building traditions that are responsible for the variations among meetinghouses in England and in America. Instead, *plan* played a more significant role in identifying particular meetinghouse types. Plan is essential to facilitating the meeting program. In fact, all major changes to Friends meetinghouse design over the course of their history coincide with changes in faith and practice. Among the practices that most influenced meetinghouse design were the business meetings and the designation of ministers, elders, and overseers.

Many colonial-era meetinghouse plans reflect the English pattern of meeting whereby men and women met together in a single room for meeting for worship and afterwards separated for business meetings, with the women's meeting held in another area. While the space allotted to the women's meeting sometimes was located in a loft or even in a separate structure, it was more often merely separated from the principal meeting room by a retractable paneled wood partition. Early on, Friends developed a system of ministers, elders, and later, overseers, to preside over the meeting for worship and attend to the affairs of the meeting. These individuals were seated in the tiered benches referred to as the "facing benches" ("the stand" or the "gallery") located in the principal meeting room. Thus facing benches and partitions became essential features of meetinghouses on both sides of the Atlantic.

In developing meetinghouses colonial Friends often began with a small log structure, none of the earliest of which survive. The earliest permanent meetinghouses in the Delaware Valley generally took one of two basic plans although they varied greatly in form and details. The first consisted of a roughly square-shaped structure containing back-to-back meeting rooms separated by a partition with a facing bench in the larger of the two rooms and a separate entrance into each room (see Sadsbury Meetinghouse and the plan of Chich-

[1] Delaware's Friends meetinghouses were not recorded as part of the current HABS project due to the efforts of students at the University of Delaware, under the direction of Professor Bernard Herman, who have undertaken measured drawings to HABS standards to be



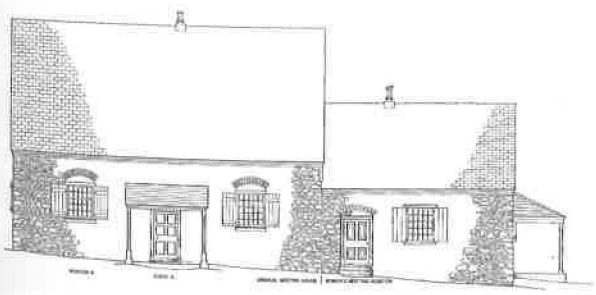
Plan of Merion Meetinghouse. Its T-shape and inequitable room arrangement reflects the lack of prescribed standards indicative of early colonial meetinghouse design. (Adam Maksay and Roger S. Miller, delineators, 1997.)

ester Meetinghouse). The second meetinghouse type consisted of a single-cell or one-room structure with an entryway to the center of the principal facade. In at least some cases, these single-cell structures were partitioned into two rooms of unequal proportions, but more often were left open as a single room. As the meeting grew in numbers, single-cell meetinghouses were enlarged to create additions subordinate to the larger structure and intended for use primarily by the women's meeting for business (see Radnor Meetinghouse). This additive quality later evolved into a two-cell meetinghouse with equal apartments for men's and women's business meetings (see Buckingham Meetinghouse).

By the late eighteenth century, Friends of PYM began meeting on both sides of a partition for worship *and* business, merely lowering the partition for the latter meetings. This meeting pattern called for a structure containing two rooms of equal proportions rather than one room large enough for the entire population and another only for the women. The new arrangement also required a facing bench in both rooms, which could best be achieved by placing the meeting rooms side-by-side and running the facing benches the length of the meetinghouse. The equally proportioned, two-cell meetinghouse constituted such a practical resolution in the quest for a building form conducive to both meetings for worship and business that it became the most prolific form in the Delaware Valley. Indeed, for nearly a century it was used as a prototype for the design of American Friends meetinghouses nationwide.

The two-cell plan would also appear in the return of the early single cell type that was selected by many of the new meetings that resulted from the 1827 schism that divided Friends into Hicksite and Orthodox contingents. Changes in faith and practice that grew out of the philosophical conflicts that precipitated the schism were also responsible for the introduction by some segments of the Quaker population of more mainstream ecclesiastical practices including the design of church-like meetinghouse forms. By the 20th century, programmatic changes such as the diminishing role of ministers, elders, and overseers, and a halt to the practice of holding separate men's and women's business meetings led to the elimination of the once-essential facing benches and partitions. Also by this time, other activities originally undertaken in separate buildings were combined within a single multi-use structure to include such elements as social room/library, schoolroom, kitchen, and restroom facilities.

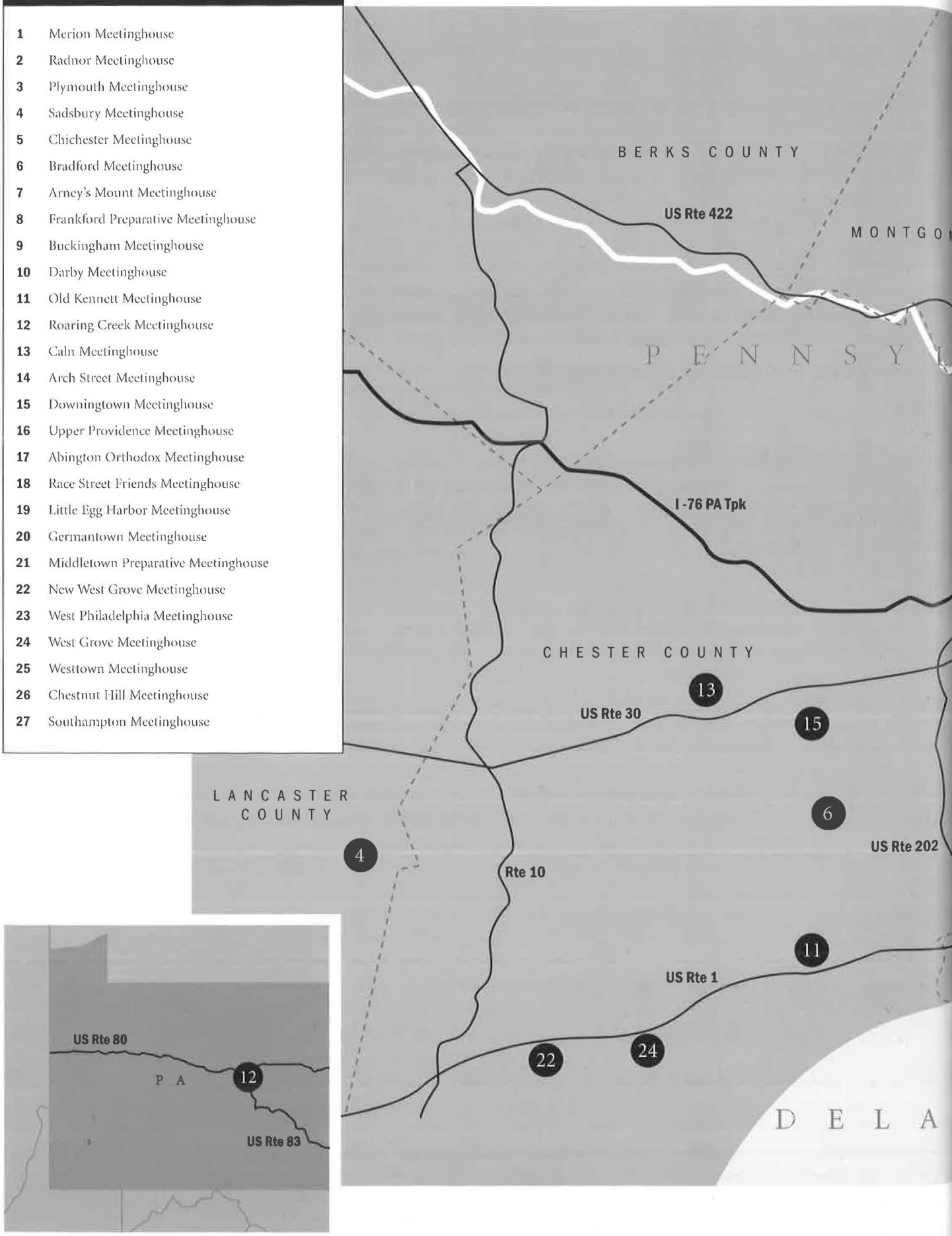
Drawing of south front elevation of the telescoping form of Radnor Meetinghouse. This form was created by the addition of a smaller women's meeting room to the earlier structure. (Roger S. Miller, H. Christie Barnard, and Adam Maksay, delineators, 1997.)



In addition to the variations in meetinghouse design and/or plan, particularly among those structures erected during the first century of Quaker settlement, regional building traditions and materials also influenced meetinghouse design. During the HABS study it was observed that meetinghouses located within the same organizational unit of monthly or quarterly meetings shared common building traits, but often varied considerably from those of neighboring quarters. While the study attempts to outline an evolutionary process for the design of meetinghouses within the Delaware Valley, there are some variables worth noting. The PYM provided no guidelines for meetinghouse design or construction but instead allowed the individual meetings relative freedom to erect structures particular to their needs. This practice is reflected in the wide variety of meetinghouse designs that were produced. It was true even during the heyday of the two-cell prototype from the late 18th to the mid-19th centuries that some old designs persisted while newer ones were also being developed. Thus the evolution of meetinghouse design does not form a strictly linear progression, rather early patterns of development have a habit of reappearing (albeit in somewhat altered form). Also noteworthy is the fact that while many meetings either construct new meetinghouses or alter old ones to conform to new patterns of Quaker faith and practice, a significant number continue to use older, seemingly antiquated structures. This latter practice is important because it underscores one of the fundamental principles of Quaker worship; because it is free of ritual and sacrament it demands no set building form.

Quaker Meetinghouses in the Delaware Valley

1 Merion Meetinghouse
2 Radnor Meetinghouse
3 Plymouth Meetinghouse
4 Sadsbury Meetinghouse
5 Chichester Meetinghouse
6 Bradford Meetinghouse
7 Arney's Mount Meetinghouse
8 Frankford Preparative Meetinghouse
9 Buckingham Meetinghouse
10 Darby Meetinghouse
11 Old Kennett Meetinghouse
12 Roaring Creek Meetinghouse
13 Caln Meetinghouse
14 Arch Street Meetinghouse
15 Downingtown Meetinghouse
16 Upper Providence Meetinghouse
17 Abington Orthodox Meetinghouse
18 Race Street Friends Meetinghouse
19 Little Egg Harbor Meetinghouse
20 Germantown Meetinghouse
21 Middletown Preparative Meetinghouse
22 New West Grove Meetinghouse
23 West Philadelphia Meetinghouse
24 West Grove Meetinghouse
25 Westtown Meetinghouse
26 Chestnut Hill Meetinghouse
27 Southampton Meetinghouse

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MERCER COUNTY
US Rte 202
BUCKS COUNTY
NTY
I-476
NIA
27
I-76 PA Tpk
16
PA Rte 611
17
US Rte 1
I-95
3
26
PHILADELPHIA
I-76
20
2
1
8
7
BURLINGTON COUNTY
23
New Jersey Tpk
DELAWARE COUNTY
18
14
21
10
I-295
5
I-95
NEW JERSEY
RE
CAMDEN COUNTY
GLOUCESTER COUNTY
PA
Garden State Pkwy
NJ
Atlantic City Expwy
19
DE