

# A COLORFUL TOWN IN QUAKER GRAY



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There are many towns in Delaware with interesting backgrounds. Each has its own outstanding citizens with their colorful family histories. But how and why does a town form in a certain spot on the map? What prompted one man to build there and others to join him? I started looking for reasons in a quiet little town near my home. I've driven through it many times, stopping only for a few groceries, to attend church services, or to visit a school. Occasionally, I had wondered about the old homes hugging its sidewalks, the dignified Friends' Meeting House, the sturdy old Whatcoat Methodist Church on Camden-Wyoming Avenue. Since both religious meeting places are over 100 years old, did religious belief figure strongly in Camden's genesis? Glasses on my nose, pen and pad in hand, I started back through time to get some answers.

To begin at the beginning, there once was a 600 acre tract of land in Delaware with only one house on it. And it remained so for 98 years. Unbelievable, isn't it? The solitary resident, James Wells, lived near the present 237 E. Camden-Wyoming Avenue in 1685 on a tract of land called "Brecknock", which had been

granted to Alexander Humphreys in 1680. Four hundred thirty-six acres of this land went to Colonel John Vining in the mid-eighteenth century. The founding father of Camden, Warner Mifflin, received this acreage from Colonel Vining's estate in 1780. In turn, Warner Mifflin sold 112 acres to his brother, Daniel, in 1783.

Now that we've ploughed through all those dates and acres, we've finally arrived at the most important transaction. The crossroads made by the meeting of the road north to Dover town and the road east to Forest Landing (Lebanon) was located on Daniel Mifflin's land, and it was around these crossroads that the town began to grow.

In the 1780's Camden's nearest neighbor, Dover, was relatively small, having a population of only 500. But it was a growing town, requiring shipping and travel connections with other areas. To accommodate passengers of the stage lines which ran between Lewes and New Castle, and those to the steamboats at Dona Landing (Leipsic-Little Creek) and Short's Landing (Smyrna), two hotels were built at Piccadilly, or the

place more commonly called Mifflin's Crossroads. Daniel Mifflin put up a tavern and a storehouse. By the year 1800, a dozen homes had been built near the crossroads, and several shops had opened for business. Just prior to the turn of the century, the name of "Camden" was finally settled on the town.

By 1818, the town had 70 lots and out-lots. Many of these were created by the division of the large tracts of land purchased by the original settlers. Such names as Hunn, Edmondson, Mifflin, Nock,



Jenkins, Taylor, and Truitt showed up again and again on the new deeds, when land was passed on to children and grandchildren.

Perhaps one of the key factors in Camden's steady growth was the settlement of so many Quaker families in the town. Known for their hard work and honest dealings, the Friends supported their growing community in such occupations as merchants, inn-keepers, carriage makers, tanners, bricklayers, and house carpenters. At the close of the nineteenth century, the town had four grocery stores, one cannery, one saw mill, one lumber yard, one boot and shoe store, two drug stores, two butchers, two undertakers, two flour and feed stores, one stove and tin-ware store, three physicians, and one real estate conveyancer.

Not only was the retail merchantile business booming, but the town was an important center for the shipping of cord-wood, staves, black oak and Spanish oak timber, grains, and fruit. Most of this shipping activity moved one mile west of town when the Delaware

Railroad opened in 1856.

But even the opening of the railroad proved a boon to George M. Stetson and William Ellison. They opened a canning business in Camden in the same year. Like Jack's bean stalk, their enterprise just grew and grew. Time and again, Stetson and Ellison added on new buildings to house their operations. Then, in 1884, a massive fire destroyed all the buildings, the Ellison home and a neighboring hardware store. A year after the rubble had been cleared away, Stetson and Ellison had rebuilt and opened their doors again.

The arrival of the iron horse also produced a wider market for the Camden area's dairy and farm produce. So the noisy nuisance the Quakers had sought to keep out of their town had some favorable points, too.

Although Camden was primarily a Quaker town, the first chapel in the community was erected by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1791. The wooden structure was built by Dr. Elijah Barratt, the son of Philip Barratt, who donated the land for Delaware's famous Barratt's Chapel near Frederica. Since the building utilized only a portion of the lot in the southwest part of town, the remainder was used as burial ground. This wooden house of worship was torn down after the new brick Whatcoat Church was built in 1856 on Camden-Wyoming Avenue. Ministers for the Methodist Church were supplied from the Dover circuit until 1835, when a separate circuit was established.



One source, Conrad's History of Delaware, states that the Society of Friends actually built a frame

meeting house in 1760, but it was soon destroyed by fire. The Quakers erected the present Friends' Meeting House on Camden-Wyoming Avenue in 1805 or 1806. In the original deed the building lot, donated by Jonathan and Patience Hunn, was described as "lying in or near the village of Camden, on the main road leading from said village to the Poor-house". (Gives one second thoughts, huh?) The building was constructed of brick made from clay found on the premises. The meeting house also served as a school for the Quaker children. Classes were conducted there until 1882, with Alice Cowgill holding the last teacher's position.

The Friends' Meeting House stands now much as it was first built, minus the horse sheds which once stood on the property. It is the only meeting house open in ~~Delaware~~ *Kent Co.* today, with approximately 50 Friends attending Sunday services.

Throughout their history, members of the Society of Friends suffered greatly for their attitudes and the stands they took for fair treatment of Indians and Negroes, prison reform, humane treatment of the mentally ill, and even for such a minor (though at the time considered major) offense as not doffing a hat to anyone, no matter what his "station" in life. They did not believe in baptizing their children, paying tithes, attending regular Christian church services, and a few Quaker men and women upset their Puritan neighbors by standing up in the streets and courts and preaching their cause. Persecution drove the Quakers down from the northeastern states to establish their own colonies further south.

The Quakers have a saying: "I have a concern." For them it is not

merely a statement but a way of life. Their concern for the rising friction and subsequent war between the colonies and England set them apart from their neighbors! They may have sympathized with the problems of the other colonists, but they did not view war as a solution. Many of them suffered even at the hands of the colonists since they would not take an oath of allegiance to the new country (Quakers would not swear any oath), causing them to lose government and teaching positions. Many refused to use the continental money, since they believed that they must remain free from using anything which furthered the war.



Instead of loading a gun, Quakers found less violent ways to promote a peaceful settlement. Warner Mifflin, an ardent pacifist, was appointed by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in the winter of '77-'78 to visit General Howe and Washington and impress upon them the desirability of a truce, talks, and discipline of British troops. Without a pass, traveling on foot, Mifflin crossed the English lines and was quickly jailed. But, after several weeks of internment, General Howe heard of this man's mission of peace and summoned him to his headquarters. There Mifflin spoke so sincerely that General Howe agreed to consider a truce, invited Mifflin to dine with him, and offered him safe conduct to General Washington's camp at Valley Forge. But the Quaker refused the General's offer, feeling



that to take advantage of this consequence of war would be against his beliefs. So he left, "respected by the guards who were obliged to take care of a man who wore a flatbrimmed hat, a gray suit without buttons, who wore no powder in his hair, and whose shoes were tied with laces".<sup>1</sup> Congress voted down the truce, but Warner Mifflin had earned the deep respect of both Generals.

Long before the North and South split over the slavery issue, many Friends Meetings had declared such an infringement on human rights abominable in their sight. They strongly recommended that all Friends who were slaveholders should set them free. Warner Mifflin did free his 21 slaves in 1774, setting a precedent. But many Quakers, knowing that freeing their slaves would work a hardship on their comfortable way of life, sidestepped the issue for decades before they finally resolved to be done with that evil practice and free their own black men.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, the Quakers found that they could not help the Negroes in their usual open fashion. Many of the Friends, including Daniel Mifflin, were strong abolitionists and helped runaway slaves by conducting the Underground Railroad. The Cooper House was one known station, complete with a tunnel to the house next door and bunks in the loft where weary escapees could rest. At night, the Negroes were stealthily moved to Wildcat Manor at Lebanon, where they hid until a ship could pick them up and steal away north to safety in Pennsylvania.

Not all the residents of Camden were against taking up arms and going into battle. A company of 78 men were mustered from Camden and the surrounding area. But church membership, families, and

friendships split over the pro-South or pro-North feelings raging through the community. At the height of this turmoil, a resident Federal General, Daniel Woodall, was pelted with stones when he rode through town in his carriage.

The rhythmic clop-clop of the horses' hooves pulling the carriages of yesteryear has gone from Camden's streets. No more do wagonloads of timber head for the steamboats and William Penn's Philadelphia. The people moving in and out of the homes and stores no longer wear the flatbrimmed hats or gray bonnets seen in a long ago day. The cannery doesn't pack its shining fruit for shipment by the 'iron horse' to points unknown. That intruder, which the Friends deemed too noisy to allow any closer than one mile from their town, was responsible for the birth of another town, Wyoming. But that's another story, another time.

Today the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs is seeking to place the crossroads area of Camden on the National Register of Historic Places. Standing on any corner of the crossroads and turning three-quarters round, one can see many of the buildings involved in this project: the Cooper House on North Main Street facing the Daniel Mifflin House, the George Truitt House on South Main Street. (He served as governor of Delaware from 1808-1811). In all, there are 22 properties selected for the National Register of Historic Places. Each building has its own unique history, each family its own special stories, combining to make a pleasant, unpretentious town rich in the history of our state and country.

<sup>1</sup>Dover - The First Two Hundred Fifty Years

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