

PLYMOUTH FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE
Friends Meeting House Study
Corner of Germantown & Butler Pikes
Plymouth
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6689

HABS
PA 6689

PHOTOGRAPHS

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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PLYMOUTH FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

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Location: Corner of Germantown and Butler Pikes, Plymouth Meeting, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Owner: Plymouth Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Present Use: Meeting house for worship and business of the Plymouth Friends. The site also includes a lower school complex.

Significance: Built in two parts, the original section of Plymouth Meeting House erected ca. 1708 is among the oldest standing Friends Meeting Houses in the Delaware Valley, and its evolution is indicative of the expansion of early meeting houses to meet programmatic changes. The ca. 1708 section was built as a single-cell meeting house to which was later appended a structure used for the women's business meetings and possibly a school. Following a fire that necessitated a partial reconstruction, the women's section was rebuilt in a manner that made it more integral with the main block, separated by a retractable wood partition rather than by a wall as had been the situation prior, and maintaining the same roof line. The reconstruction came at a time when meeting houses were being erected as two-cell or "doubled plan" structures with equal apartments for men's and women's business meetings, and old meeting houses were being remodeled to conform to the new standard.

Historian: Catherine C. Lavoie, 2000.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The original section of the meeting house was erected ca. 1708, with an addition made sometime between 1780 and 1800. There is little extant evidence with which to date either section of the Plymouth Meeting House. The early minutes of the preparative meeting are no longer extant. The existence of a meeting house at Plymouth is first acknowledged within the minutes of the Radnor Monthly Meeting with regard to a wedding being held there in June of 1709. Hence it has been assumed that the meeting house was begun the previous year. There is some confusion, however, over the fact that as late as 1714 Plymouth Friends were requesting of the monthly meeting permission to meet during the winter months at the home of one of its members. Still, it may have been that a certain segment of the meeting was too distant to travel to the meeting house in

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inclement weather and opted to meet at a more convenient location.¹

Likewise, the ca. 1780 date for the addition cannot be confirmed by preparative meeting minutes which are not extant before 1790. In any case, Friends' meeting minutes are generally vague at best when discussing matters of building design and construction, preferring to focus on issues of faith and practice. The Treasurer's Book for Plymouth Meeting for a period from 1773 until 1822 provides some insight, however. The book records the date and amounts of subscriptions paid by its members towards the expenses of the meeting. These levels remain fairly constant from 1773 through to the mid-1780s when double or triple the usual amount is required to meet undisclosed expenses. These rates of increase continue until 1796, at which time a "six fold" collection is taken for "the use of the meeting school," and before the end of that year, an additional "seven fold" is forthcoming. Interestingly enough, it has been claimed that the addition was made for use as a school room. Perhaps like Radnor Meeting, the addition was used as a dual-purpose school and women's meeting facility.

In 1797, the Treasurer notes that "It is agreed to raise a ten fold collection for repairing the meeting house for the use of the Quarterly Meeting." A look at the minutes for Abington Quarterly Meeting does in fact indicate that the west end of their meeting house was being rebuilt in 1797, necessitating that meetings be held elsewhere. Returning to Plymouth Meeting's Treasurers accounts, the collection rate continues to escalate to a rate of twenty-five to thirty times the standard for the years of 1799 through 1802. Although the latter year's collections appear to have been made principally to fund the construction of a stone stable and a "necessary" or privy, also included in the accounting are various repairs to the meeting house and "the small house by the meeting house." The latter is likely a reference to the addition as it originally stood. According to oral tradition, there was no passage between the meeting house proper and the addition. It was not uncommon during the early settlement period for the women's meeting section to be separate from the large structure that was used for meeting for worship and men's business meetings.

Based on the Treasurer's Book, the addition to the meeting house was likely undertaken during the 1790s as part of a larger building campaign that allowed for additional space for the school, women's business meetings, meetings of the larger Friends community, as well as ancillary buildings providing for the stabling of horses and for a privy.

2. Architect: As was indicative of Quaker practice, the plan of the meeting house was probably determined by the meeting itself, in conjunction with the Radnor Monthly

¹ Pennsylvania Historical Survey, Division of Community Service Programs, Work Projects Administration. *Inventory of Church Archives, Society of Friends in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Friends Historical Association, 1941), 142.

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Meeting under whose care Plymouth Preparative Meeting was established and operated until 1714. At that time, the Gwynedd Monthly Meeting was established and Plymouth Meeting became part of it.

3. Owners: Title to the property, approximately 5 acres including a meeting house, burying ground, library, and lower school complex, is held by the Trustees of Plymouth Monthly Meeting. The first deed to the property was issued to meeting elders Isaac Prince, William Dickinson, Abraham Dawes, and John Roads from Lumly Williams on October 6, 1704.²

4. Builders, contractors, suppliers: No information has been revealed with regard to the planning or construction of Plymouth Meeting House. Again, Quaker practice generally dictated that the members themselves bring whatever skills and/or materials at their disposal to the construction of the meeting house. A building committee was formed, working in conjunction with the larger meeting to make determinations as to form and to oversee the construction process.

5. Original plans and construction: Plymouth Meeting House began ca. 1708 as a single-story, three-bay-by-three-bay stone building. Like the meeting house of the Radnor Friends, under whose care Plymouth Meeting was created, the Plymouth Meeting House appeared as a single-celled structure to which was later appended a smaller section to accommodate women's business meetings and a school. This was indicative of a larger pattern of meeting house development that took place in the more isolated countryside. Early meeting houses often took on a telescoping form that resulted from the addition of a women's meeting section to an earlier structure. The lowered height of the addition was in proportion to its overall diminutive size. This form likely evolved from the desire to erect a meeting house for worship as soon as possible, with the idea that they would add a section to accommodate separate business meetings when they were better able (or perhaps when their numbers necessitated it). Preoccupied with establishing their own homes and farms, the early Friends often were hard-pressed to contribute to the construction of a meeting house. And it was not uncommon during this period for Friends to meet in a structure that was not fully completed.³

² Helen Reichart Mirras, "National Register of Historic Places, Inventory--Nomination form, Plymouth Friends Meeting House" (National Park Service, prepared December 30, 1969).

³ The Center Meeting House was a prime example. Its construction dragged on for at least four years, and it was used while still unfinished because the individual preparative meetings that were to contribute to the cost of its construction were unable for what of their own meeting houses. See Pennsylvania Historical Survey, Division of Community Service Programs, Work Projects Administration. *Inventory of Church Archives, Society of Friends in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Friends Historical Association, 1941), 55-58.

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Although Radnor is the only meeting house erected in a telescoping form to survive, this pattern of development is established within meeting minutes and other extant sources and was clearly the case at Plymouth. A photograph taken of Plymouth Meeting House prior to the 1867 fire that required its reconstruction captured its previously telescoping form. The variations that existed between these early women's meeting additions and the meeting house proper are significant because they indicate that in many cases they were treated as completely separate structures. When reconstructed in the 1860s, the addition appeared more in keeping with the main block, with the roof height at the same level. The interior wall that divided the two sections was also removed. There is said to have been no passageway between the main block and the women's meeting section, which actually was referred to in the minutes as "the little meeting house."⁴

6. Alterations and additions: At the time of the reconstruction that followed the fire of February 13, 1867, the later, eastern section of the meeting house was made to conform to the pattern and configuration of the original ca. 1708 meeting house, all under one roof. Changes were obviously necessitated by both the fire and new patterns of meeting practice that allowed for equal spaces for men's and women's business meetings separated by a retractable wood partition. Gallery spaces, which may have existed in the original section prior to reconstruction, were built into both gable ends of the meeting house. While the extent of the fire was not fully disclosed, it is likely that the interior furnishings including the facing benches and the wainscoting, were rebuilt at this time.

The building committee formed by the meeting to rebuild the meeting house consisted of Charles Williams, Lewis A. Lukens, Thomas Livezey, and Elias H. Corson. According to the accounts of the committee, \$3,415.00 was paid to J. Peirce "for Building House." Elias Corson was also paid for labor (and for wood) as was Eli Pugh. Samuel D. Marple was paid for stone, and Jonathan Jones & Sons for lumber. The rebuilt structure was made comfortable through the addition of cushions, window blinds and matting. The cost of rebuilding the meeting house came to about \$5,800.00, \$3,000.00 of which was covered by an insurance policy.⁵

The entryways to the front of the meeting house were likely covered originally by gabled hoods, later replaced by the larger yet still simple porticos that appears in photographs both before and after the fire of 1867. The porch that currently runs the length of the front facade is likely an early twentieth century addition.

In 1945, the Annie H. Wilson memorial room was added to the rear northeast corner of the meeting house to provide space for social and community events. Central heating

⁴ Plymouth Preparative Meeting, Minutes, 9 mo. 4th day 1806.

⁵ Ibid., 10mo. 12th day 1867.

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was also added to the meeting house (and the new section) at this time.⁶

B. Historical Context:

The Plymouth Friends Meeting was formed as an indulged meeting for worship in 1702 by members of the Haverford Monthly Meeting (later becoming the Radnor Monthly Meeting) as a meeting of convenience, particularly during the winter months when travel would have been made more difficult by severe weather conditions. As stated within the monthly meeting minutes, “The representatives of Harferd (sic.) Monthly Meeting laid before this meeting, that some friends belonging to their meeting living att and near Plymouth being so far from them desired that they may have a first days meeting for of [the] service of Truth to be held during this winter time, to which this meeting agrees and desires that frds [friends] may remember to visit them.”⁷ The following winter, the Plymouth Friends requested that the meeting “sett up about Plymouth last winter for worship that season” be established as a “settled meeting” and that a customary second weekly meeting “every fifth day” also be allowed, to which the quarterly meeting agreed.⁸ The first meetings were held in the homes of members Hugh Jones and David Meredith, until a meeting house could be built sometime between 1708 and 1714.⁹ The Plymouth Meeting rose from indulged to preparative meeting status in 1710, under the care of the Radnor Monthly Meeting. When a monthly meeting was established within the closer Gwynedd Meeting in 1714, Plymouth Preparative was transferred to their care.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The original ca. 1708 single-cell, central-entry form of Plymouth was typical of the meeting house plans of the early settlement period in the many areas of the Delaware Valley. At some later date, the meeting house received a telescoping addition in order to accommodate separate women’s business meetings and a school, which also followed a common pattern of meeting house evolution. Renovations

⁶ Suzanne Marinell, “Plymouth Friends Meeting: A Short History,” *The Colonial*, October 7, 1992.

⁷ Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting, Minutes, 10th month, 7th day 1702. *A note on dates:* except were quoted and in the formal references, the report translates the “Scriptural” (ie. numerical) names of months favored by Friends into the more common pagan names. According to the Julian calendar in use before 1752, the year began in March. Within the text of the report, the pre-1752 dates have been converted to their modern equivalents. However, no attempt has been made to confirm the modernization of dates derived from secondary sources.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4th month, 7th day 1703.

⁹ Pennsylvania Historical Survey, Division of Community Service Programs, Work Projects Administration. *Inventory of Church Archives, Society of Friends in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Friends Historical Association, 1941), 142.

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occurring during the mid-nineteenth century allowed for the reconfiguring of the overall plan in order to support equally sized apartments for men's and women's business that were separated by a retractable wood partition rather than by a wall. This and other modifications were made in the effort to adapt an early building to the changing American Friends Program. The interior fittings and furnishings likely date to the late 1860s following the post-fire reconstruction. The meeting house otherwise retains features indicative of early patterns of construction such as the rear carriage doors that were more commonly built during the first half of the eighteenth century.

2. Condition of fabric: The meeting house is well maintained and in good condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The meeting house is a two-cell, single-story, six-bay by three-bay structure (three bays per section), with doorways to the front and rear. It measures approximately 71' across; the original western section measuring 32' and the eastern portion measuring 39'. A single-story, three-bay-by-one-bay addition was made to the northern rear corner of the meeting house in 1945 (date stone), to be used as a social room.

2. Foundations: The foundations are of rubble stone.

3. Walls: The walls are constructed of roughly coursed stone; the stone work in the two section varies in color and the seam is clearly visible.

4. Structural systems, framing: The meeting house is of load-bearing masonry construction with a roof system consisting of pegged rafters supported by a single purlin held in place by a series of braces. Each brace is mounted into the floor and pegged into the purlin, with additional support provided a member mounted at the 45-degree angle from the brace to the purlin. The lower portion of the rafts bears the marks of lath and plaster.

5. Porches, stoops: A porch runs the length of the front facade, replacing the former door hoods, and there is a porch along the northeast end.

6. Chimneys: The chimneys and corresponding fireplaces have been removed due to disrepair. The outline of the fireplaces and their hearths are still visible in the attic.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: There is a doorway to the center of each three-bay unit of the two-cell structure in the facade of both the front and rear elevations. There are

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round-arched lintels and sidelights in the doorway to the east side. The doorways in the front facade are double, paneled doors. The rear doorways have round-arched lintels and paneled bi-fold doors.

b. Windows and shutters: The meeting house is lit by six-over-six-light sash windows, lower on the southeast front elevation, and with arched lintels. There are smaller six-over-six-light windows in gable ends. There is an in filled window or battened opening at southwest gable end. The windows have paneled shutters.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The meeting house has a side gabled roof. An exposed wood beam and/or nailing block in the southwest gable end may indicate a change in the roof line (an opening has also been in filled here).

b. Cornice, eaves: The eaves overhang slightly and there is a narrow boxed return in the cornice.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The meeting house interior consists of a single room divided by a retractable wood partition into two apartments. There is a tiered facing bench along the rear wall and separate galleries in either gable end.

2. Stairways: There is an open-string, two-run stairway in the front corner to either end of the meeting house that leads to a gallery in the gable end. Each has a handrail only, mounted on a simple square newel post.

3. Flooring: The floor is of random-width, unfinished planks held in place by pegs.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are of plaster with beaded wainscoting that likely dates to the late 1860s post-fire reconstruction.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The doors are inset with plain plaster reveals. There are two doorways to the front with corresponding carriage or mounting doors in the opposing wall. There are paneled double doors at each of these doorways. Single doorways are also located to the center of each gable end.

b. Windows: The windows are also inset with plain reveals.

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6. Benches: The facing benches run along the northwest wall, and has two tiers of facing benches, with two rows of moveable benches before them. There are tiered benches along the southeast and southwest walls as well.

7. Partition: The partitions are somewhat unusual in that they are composed of two separate retractable units mounted within a plastered wall, with a doorway between them. Each unit consists of paneled wood partitions that retract from above and below. The pulley system that operates the partitions can be seen in the attic.

8. Balcony/gallery: There are galleries at both the east and west ends, with stairways located in the front corners of the meeting house.

9. Mechanical equipment:

a. Heating: The central heating system is located beneath a trapped door in the floor that leads to a dug-out basement in east section.

b. Lighting: The meeting house is lit by a modern system of recessed lights.

c. Plumbing: The meeting house has plumbing and modern restroom facilities in the rear addition.

D. Site:

1. Historic landscape design: There is a burying ground located to the west of the meeting house.

2. Outbuildings: The William Jeanes Memorial Library building was built in 1933, later being adapted by the Plymouth Friends School for use by their music and science departments.¹⁰ A separate school building is located to the north. Carriage sheds are located to the northwest (rear) of the meeting house.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early views:

Plymouth Meeting [House] about 1860, n.d. Captioned "In rebuilding old walls were raised when possible and new building of one height resulted." Photograph Collection 110/P673/003, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

¹⁰ Marinell, p. 5.

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Plymouth Meeting House post reconstruction in 1867-68, n.d., S.R. Fisher, Landscape Photographer, Norristown, PA. Photograph Collection 110/P673/033, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

Plymouth Meeting House, perspective view of front to include surrounding walls and horseshed to the side, n.d., J.R. Moore Collection, Photograph Collection 110/P673/026, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

Plymouth Meeting House, perspective view of front, n.d., W.W. Dewees Collection, Photograph Collection 110/P673/024, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

Postcard View, "Plymouth Meeting House, Plymouth Meeting P.O., Pa." perspective view of front to include surrounding walls and horseshed to the side, n.d., postmarked 1906., Photograph Collection 110/P673, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

Postcard View, "Plymouth Meeting House, (Used as a Hospital during and after the Battle at Germantown, Oct. 4th, 1777), Conshohocken, Pa." perspective view of front, n.d., postmarked 1907., Photograph Collection 110/P673/021, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

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Matlack, T. Chalkley. "Brief Historical Sketches concerning Friends' Meetings of the Past and Present with special reference to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting," p. 59-62, (the original volumes are located at The Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library; copy available at Friends Historical Library), 1938.

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Mirras, Helen Reichart. "National Register of Historic Places, Inventory--Nomination form, Plymouth Friends Meeting House," National Park Service, prepared December 30, 1969.

Pennsylvania Historical Survey, Division of Community Service Programs, Work Projects Administration. *Inventory of Church Archives, Society of Friends in Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: Friends Historical Association, 1941.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of the Plymouth Friends Meeting House was undertaken as part of a larger project to record the Friends Meetings Houses of the Delaware Valley. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), E. Blaine Cliver, Chief of HABS/HAER; Paul Dolinsky, Chief of HABS; funding was made possible through a congressional appropriation for documentation in Southeastern Pennsylvania. The project was planned and administered by HABS historians Aaron V. Wunsch and Catherine C. Lavoie; and architect Robert R. Arzola. The project historians were Aaron V. Wunsch and Catherine C. Lavoie. Large Format Photography was undertaken by Jack E. Boucher, HABS photographer. Special thanks for their assistance in facilitating the documentation of Plymouth Meeting House goes to Mary Corson, and David Miller, Clerk, for the meeting.