

Old Caln History

If you've been attending our Meeting for any length of time, you most likely heard someone speak of "Old Caln." Were they mentioning a town, a township, or what? In fact, they most likely were speaking of an historic Meetinghouse, located not far from our Meeting, along the Kings Highway (U.S. Route 340) in Caln Township. Just how did this Meetinghouse get its nickname and what's its relationship to our Meeting?

Early History

Many Quakers lived in this area during the early 18th century. Only 34 years had passed since William Penn received his charter from the King of England and many Friends emigrated to his colony of Pennsylvania. Among them were two brothers, John and Aaron Mendenhall, who by 1716 had become older "weighty" Friends. Both lived on what was then the frontier to the west of the Quaker stronghold of Philadelphia. To meet the increased spiritual demand of farming families in the area, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting set up Caln Preparative Meeting. The Mendenhall brothers donated a piece of their land in what's now Thorndale, Pennsylvania, to build a simple log Meetinghouse, which became known as Calne Meeting.

As the members of the fledgling meeting prospered over the next 10 years, they decided to build a more substantial stone Meetinghouse on land owned by Richard Pike "On the further side of ye valley, upon ye mountain" in a grove of trees along the North side of the King's Provincial Road, or Lancaster Road, the only road connecting Philadelphia with Lancaster—known as King's Highway today.

In 1728 the original Caln Township split, creating West Caln Township. Friends in the new township built their own Meetinghouse near Waggontown in 1756 and called it "West Caln." From that point on, the original Meetinghouse became what we know today as "Old Caln."

The Meeting Grows

By the end of the 18th century, a number of meetings had blossomed to the west of Philadelphia. The Quarterly Meeting of Caln, created in 1800 by Bradford, Robeson, Sadsbury, and Uwchlan Monthly Meetings, met in the 1726 Meetinghouse. In those early years, just about everyone attended Quarterly Meeting—both to participate in conducting business of the Quarter and to socialize. And since the Meetinghouse wasn't large enough to accommodate everyone who attended Quarterly Meeting, they enlarged the east room of the original two-room building in 1801.

Old Caln Meetinghouse west side porch. Builders gathered every stone used in the Meetinghouse's walls from local fields and lifted them into place. Because wet mortar couldn't support a high wall of stone, the builders laid the stone up to two feet high. After the mortar in that section set, they'd add another

"band" of stone on top of it, and so on until it reached the desired height. They meticulously laid flat stones on the exterior and interior of the walls, filling the center with rubble. Unlike many of the farmhouses built at the time, the builders of the Caln Meetinghouse meant for their work to be seen rather than covered over with stucco.

The laid one-inch-thick white oak planks for the floor in the Meetinghouse. Instead of going down to their local building supply store as we do now, they had to fell trees with axes and drag the logs behind horses or oxen to a clearing where they sawed, planed, and scraped each board by hand. They secured the floor boards with expensive handmade iron nails.

The builders used poplar for the interior walls, sliding panels, chair rails and benches within the Meetinghouse. At that time, men and women met in separate Meetings for Business, necessitating the movable walls. A designated individual would go between the rooms informing the groups of decisions about items on the agenda.

The Hicksite/Orthodox Vision

Old Caln Hicksite graveyard lies behind the Meetinghouse. In 1827/28, a Hicksite/Orthodox division occurred and Bradford, Robeson, and Uwchlan went mostly Orthodox. Sadsbury and its half dozen preparative meetings went mostly Hicksite. At Old Caln, those who went Orthodox met in the east room of the large meetinghouse while the Hicksites met in the west room, with both groups using the middle room as needed. The Orthodox at Old Caln also created a separate burial ground across King's Highway from the now Hicksite Meetinghouse. In 1907 the Orthodox began holding their meetings in a home in Coatesville and continued doing so for a few years until they built a new meetinghouse in Coatesville where members of the small Orthodox Sadsbury Meeting joined them.

Sometime in the 1960s Sadsbury appealed to Caln Quarterly Meeting for financial help with Old Caln. Caln Quarterly Meeting took over paying for the insurance the abandoned Meetinghouse.

Sometime after this, both Bradford and Sadsbury had less than a dozen active participants, with only four persons attending First Day Meeting for Worship. Some individuals at Sadsbury were looking at the possibility of laying down the monthly meeting, but then the question of what to do about all of their properties became a major problem and Old Caln soon fell into neglect. Their largest single concern was what to do about Old Caln. Eventually, both Bradford and Sadsbury became active meetings again, but both are still rather small.

Old Caln Meetinghouse endured vandalism and neglect until after a fire in 1970 when a group of interested Friends—some from Downingtown Meeting—and other individuals formed the Old Caln Township Historical Society.

The smaller room in Old Caln Meetinghouse. Until taken over by the Caln Historical Society, Old Caln was always under the care of Sadsbury Monthly Meeting. East Caln was never a monthly meeting, it was always preparative to Sadsbury. When Sadsbury Meeting discontinued weekly Meetings for Worship and then decided to lay down the East Caln Preparative Meeting, it still had full responsibility for the property. And since Old Caln Meeting was Hicksite and Downingtown (Uwchlan) was Orthodox, there was an impediment to activity between them. Thus, Downingtown Friends couldn't have officially taken over care of Old Caln.

During its time as an active meeting, Old Caln wasn't preparative to Sadsbury. Before the 1828 division, Old Caln was preparative first to Concord Monthly Meeting and then Bradford Monthly Meeting. After the division, both the orthodox and Hicksite Old Caln Preparative Meetings were preparative to their respective Bradford Monthly Meetings. Many erroneously believe that after the division only Caln Preparative Meeting Orthodox was under Bradford Monthly Meeting, while the Caln Preparative Meeting Hicksite was under Sadsbury Monthly Meeting Hicksite. Actually, it was only after Bradford Monthly Meeting Hicksite became discontinued that Sadsbury came into official control of Old Caln.

Caln Quarterly Meeting Hicksite was, for all practical purposes, Sadsbury Monthly Meeting, since of the three monthly meetings constituting Caln Quarter, only Sadsbury was a viable meeting. As meetings get weak, quarterly Meetings are expected to make sure the properties of their weak meetings, especially the cemeteries, are receiving good care. Thus Sadsbury Friends would be concerned about Old Caln even before Sadsbury came into actual possession of Old Caln.

The Meetinghouse Today

The Old Caln Meetinghouse today remains much the same as it did in the 19th century, though electricity had to be installed. A wood stove still heats the interior in winter for Meeting for Worship. To the rear of the Meetinghouse stands the Hicksite graveyard, enclosed by stone walls. Here lie the remains of about 730 Friends, though many of the graves now lie unmarked. The last burial at Old Caln was in 1932.

Today, as the population of the area increases, Old Caln is again active as a Quaker Meetinghouse, but this time it's Orthodox Friends who meet there on each Sunday, except the last one of the month, at 10:30 A.M. for Meeting for Worship.

With sincere thanks to Taylor Lamborn of Sadsbury Friends Meeting for his insightful input.