

‘First Revolutionary Abolitionist’ returned to Quakers after 300 years

The eighteenth-century Quaker who used confrontational protest to persuade the Religious Society of Friends to oppose slavery, has been formally re-associated with his faith community, after having been disowned for nearly 300 years.

In 1776, Quakers became the first western faith community to make enslavement a disownable offence. Lay’s activism was instrumental to this outcome, but Lay himself, decades earlier, was disowned a total of four times for his theatrical and zealous protests for equality.

As one of the first people anywhere in the world to publish a call for an outright end to slavery everywhere, immediately, Lay dedicated his life to persuading his Quaker community to put in to practice their testimony to equality.

Benjamin Lay was best known in his time for his dramatic interventions during Meetings in Pennsylvania, most notoriously – filling a book with red juice representing blood and splattering it on the slave owners present.

Lay returned to public attention in 2017 following the publication of a sympathetic biography by US historian Marcus Rediker, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf who became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* (Beacon Press/Verso, 2017).

Drawing strongly on Quaker records in London, Essex and Pennsylvania where Lay resided, the book revealed how a lack of clarity surrounding Lay’s eventual reinstatement in London was used as a part of the justification to exclude Lay from membership in North America.

As perhaps the most tangible – and regretful to Modern Quakers – result, when Lay published his seminal anti-slavery tract *All Slave Keepers that keep the innocent in bondage: Apostates*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting responded by publicly declaring ‘That the author is not of their religious community; that they disapprove of his Conduct, the Composition and Printing of the Book’.

Although there is no formal procedure for reinstating deceased members, Quakers in Abington Pennsylvania where Lay attended towards the end of his life have agreed to come as close as they could, by formally recognising Benjamin Lay as a ‘Friend of the Truth and as being in unity with the spirit’, and acknowledging his ‘willingness to repeatedly speak his messages of Truth to a society that was in denial about the evils of slavery’.

In the same week, modern day Quakers from the successor to Lay’s North London Meeting have agreed to write to all communities from which Lay was subsequently disowned to clarify that Lay is in good standing with North London Quakers, emphasising that they too recognise him as ‘a Friend of the Truth in unity with the spirit of the Meeting’.

Loretta Fox of Abington Monthly Meeting said

"Although Benjamin Lay frequently challenged fellow Friends for their hypocrisy, and was formally removed from membership as a result, he was never shunned by his community, with whom he worshipped to the end of his life.

A grave marker (tombstone) will soon be placed in the Abington Meeting burial ground where Benjamin Lay and his wife, Sarah, are laid to rest, so that future generations of Friends and visitors will be able to see this outward recognition that they were buried in the care of the Meeting.

Although the exact location of the grave is unknown, as will be indicated on the stone, elders of the Meeting do know the approximate location. Abington Meeting has also set up a page on their website [www.abingtonmeeting.org](http://www.abingtonmeeting.org) to provide information about Benjamin Lay for the wider community."

Responding to the decisions of North London and Abington Quakers, biographer Marcus Rediker said:

"I must confess, I was moved to tears when I read these minutes. This action would have meant so much to Benjamin, no question about it. He dearly loved his fellow Quakers."

ENDS

1. The Abington Meeting minute, agreed on 10 November 2017 reads as follows:

“Abington Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends recognizes Benjamin Lay’s dedication to equality, and his willingness to repeatedly speak his messages of Truth to a society that was in denial about the evils of slavery. We acknowledge that Benjamin Lay used radical activism in his attempts to teach his peers to recognize the equality before God of all people, regardless of race or gender. He lived his life with integrity according to his Quaker beliefs, and he called others, especially slave-owners, to accountability.

Benjamin Lay was written out of membership at Abington Monthly Meeting on the thirtieth day, eleventh month, 1737 (which by the Quaker calendar, while the Julian calendar was in use, would have been January 30, 1738), because his zealous actions were considered disruptive. It is now known that at least two of the Friends who led the discernment about writing Benjamin Lay out of membership in the Society of Friends were slave-owners and were likely targeted by Benjamin Lay's anti-slavery activism. Benjamin Lay was disowned decades before Quakers were disowned for being slave-owners.

We now recognize the truth behind Benjamin Lay’s abolitionist efforts. Although we may not reinstate membership for someone who is deceased, we recognize Benjamin Lay as a Friend of the Truth and as being in unity with the spirit of our Abington Monthly Meeting.”

2. The North London Area Meeting minute, Agreed on 18 November 2017 reads as follows:

“Quakers are proud of the times in history we have been ahead of our time on progressive social issues - but preceding those moments, there have often been long periods when we have not walked the path we would later understand to be the just one. At a time when racism seems as present and ugly as ever - both globally and nationally - and the structures of white supremacy are being defended and strengthened by powerful forces in our societies, this seems a timely moment for North London Area Meeting to reflect on its involvement in the struggle for racial justice.

North London Area Meeting recognises Benjamin Lay’s dedication to equality - and his willingness to repeatedly speak his messages of Truth. We also recognise Benjamin Lay as being a Friend of the Truth - and as being in unity with the spirit of our Area Meeting. We ask our Clerking team to write to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Abington Monthly Meeting and Southern East Anglia Area Meeting (successor to Colchester & Coggeshall Monthly Meeting) to clarify that Lay is in good standing with North London Area Meeting (successor to Devonshire House Monthly Meeting).”

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