

Joshua Brown, Prisoner for Conscience Sake

by A. Day Bradley

In 1778 Joshua Brown of Little Britain Township (Now Fulton), a recorded minister of the Society of Friends, with two companions spent some six months in prison at Ninety Six in South Carolina. His concern to make a religious visit to the meetings of Friends in the South was only strengthened by the difficulties of travel and the fact that religious pacifists were frequently regarded as subversive characters by the contending parties of the American Revolution.

Joshua Brown's grandparents, James and Honour (Clayton) Brown, were both emigrants, James from Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, and Honour from London. They were married the Eighth of Sixth Month (August) 1679, by Friends ceremony at Burlington Friends Meeting. Tradition records that the early meetings of the Friends at Burlington, New Jersey, were held under the sail of the Kent as was the marriage of James and Honour.¹ Honour had arrived in the Kent from London with her parents William and Prudence Clayton. William Clayton was a member of the Proprietary Council and was one of the nine Justices of the Court at Upland (Chester).² James Brown, the emigrant grandfather of Joshua, and his brother William were the sons of Richard and Mary Brown, members of Wellingborough Monthly Meeting.³

The Brown family was very early "convinced of Friends principles through the instrumentality of William Dewsbury", and members of the family remained active in meetings in Northamptonshire, Bedford and Hertford. An article written for the tercentenary of Quakerism says "Almost bridging the entire span of 300 years is the remarkable Quaker family of Brown." Daniel Brown, probably the eldest son of Richard and Mary "appears on the lists of presentments for such offenses as failing to attend divine services at the parish church and for non-payment of church rates no less than eleven times between 1667 and 1685." As a consistent Friend he could neither support or attend the establish-

ed church. "In 1952 died Wilfred H. Brown, a director of the famous Luton (Bedfordshire) milling firm of Brown Brothers and a member of the Harpenden Meeting of Friends (Hertfordshire)." ⁴

James Brown settled near Marcus Hook and in 1688 he gave Friends the two acres of ground on which Chichester Meeting House was built (at Boothwyn, Delaware Co.). The Brown family was long associated with the community of Friends centered about the East Nottingham Meeting House at Calvert, Maryland. ⁵ This settlement of Friends was established in 1701 by William Penn as a means of holding the area against the claim of Lord Baltimore. Penn granted 20,000 acres, the Nottingham Lots, to some fifteen Friends including the brothers James and William Brown. ⁶ However when the Mason and Dixon Line was surveyed practically all of the Nottingham Lots became Maryland territory, as did East Nottingham Meeting House.

In 1875 Levi K. Brown wrote, "A large number of descendants of the Browns, even to the eighth generation, remain in Nottingham and adjacent neighborhoods. In 1751 no less than six of this family, viz., James, William, Joshua, Thomas, Esther and Deborah were acknowledged ministers in Nottingham Monthly Meeting. ... Joshua was among the first who removed from Nottingham and settled in the Conowingo Valley, where Little Britain Meeting was established. He traveled extensively, visiting most, if not all the meetings in the Colonies."

An account of Joshua Brown's life and ministry, based on his own writings, has been reprinted recently. His statements about his early life and marriage are in the usual laconic style of Quaker ministers.

I was born on the 5th day of the Fifth month (July) 1717 at West Nottingham, in the County of Chester, and Province of Pennsylvania. ... When Nottingham was first settled my grandfather (James) removed there taking my father (Jeremiah) with him. My mother was born in Scotland. When twelve to fourteen years of age, she was with many others, forcibly taken, carried on board a ship, and brought to Pennsylvania. She was here sold to Caleb Pusey, near Chester, and served her time out. When free she married William Coles and settled at Nottingham. Some time after my father married her.

When near the age of twenty, I was married to Hannah, the daughter of Elisha and Rachel Gatchell of East Nottingham. She proved a tender and affectionate wife, and in time became truly a religious woman.

My father settling me in West Nottingham (near Rising Sun) gave me a piece of land, on which I lived upwards of twenty years. ⁸

Early in 1759 Joshua removed to Little Britain Township, where he was a farmer and miller. His farm, north of Goshen, was known to later generations as the Ambler Mill Farm. This was in Fulton Township after Little Britain Township was divided. His house built in 1759 or 1760 was later known as the Slater Brown House. ⁹

Joshua's ministry began in 1744 when he with John Churchman and others were appointed to visit the families of Nottingham Meeting.

I visited Friends families pretty generally. It was a time of some improvement to me, and I was sometimes concerned to speak a few words in the

families, in great fear and dread. ... Soon after this I was concerned to appear in public meeting with a few words in great humility of mind." ¹⁰

In the course of his life Joshua made no less than sixteen journeys to visit the meetings of Friends, the first in 1756 to Maryland and Virginia, the last in 1790 to New York and New England when he was 83. Many of these travels lasted several months. The Quaker minister attended the stated meetings "for worship and discipline as they came in course", visited the families of Friends and frequently "appointed meetings for those not of our Society."

The traveling minister was a powerful influence in early American Quakerism. Meetings in remote areas were kept in touch with current Quaker thought and activity and departures from Friends principles and rules of conduct were noted, oftentimes with direct and explicit comment. Ministers like Joshua Brown were a means of crystalizing anti-slavery sentiment in the Society. "He maintained a faithful testimony against slavery and in young life was the means of setting free a number of colored persons attached to an estate in which his wife had an interest." ¹¹ In Second Month (February) 1778 he attended Deer Creek Monthly Meeting, at Darlington, Maryland.

In this meeting his mind was brought under deep exercise on account of some of those, who had been often visited and warned both immediately by the Holy Spirit, 2nd instrumentally by the Lord's faithful messengers to set their slaves free, but who had yet refused obedience to the clear manifestation of duty until with some of them it was about the eleventh hour. ... He was constrained to warn them, to give up in obedience while the day of mercy was yet lengthened out to them. ¹²

In 1780 he attended the Yearly Meeting in Maryland and afterwards visited Johns Hopkins at South River in Anne Arundel County. Hopkins had freed his slaves when they reached the age of 25. "Friends felt concerned to have a sitting with him, in which they intimated something more than merely their liberty was due them." ¹³

In Second Month 1778 he set out to visit the meetings in Virginia and the Carolinas, disregarding the dangers and difficulties due to the Revolutionary War.

Taking sundry meetings on my way through Maryland and Virginia, I visited the Friends from Philadelphia, who were then in a state of banishment at and near Winchester. ... I had to sympathize with them very nearly, and I stayed there till after the death of our Friend, Thomas Gilpin, one of them who died in exile. ¹⁴

After his visit to Winchester he was joined by Achilles Douglas of Virginia and when they reached South Carolina, Uriah Carson joined them as "a pilot." At Ninety Six in South Carolina they were stopped by the authorities. They had no papers other than the usual certificates from their home meetings expressing the "unity of the meeting with their concern to make a religious visit." Quaker discipline sternly forbade taking an oath to support any government or to have a part in

changing government by force, or indeed to post a bond never to return. This refusal led to their arrest and confinement in the jail at Ninety Six.

We informed the judge that we were principled against all wars and fighting, and looked upon it, that by taking the test (oath or affirmation of allegiance), we were liable to be called into martial service, and being innocent men, neither could we give security as their law mentioned, for that would imply guilt, and would appear also to be like limiting the Almighty, who perhaps might call us there again in his service. I likewise mentioned to him (the judge) the bill of rights, published by the Congress which expressly saith, no man shall be taken or deprived of his liberty, except something be proved against him by oath or affirmation; neither should any man be brought to evidence against himself. The judge owned this was so, "but now", said he, "we must break over everything."¹⁵

While they were imprisoned at Ninety Six, they were allowed to hold religious meetings in the jail and in the court house. In the meantime Friends in Charleston secured a habeas corpus in order to bring them before the authorities in Charleston. After more than two months at Ninety Six they were ordered to give security to go to Charleston and then to be banished to Europe.

I then wrote an answer to the high sheriff, saying, I received thy letter, in which thou informed me the president (of the Council) desires to know if we will give security to go to Charleston in order for banishment. ... If thou can trust us we will faithfully obey, but as to giving security, we cannot move a finger towards being instrumental in our banishment. ...

I conclude thy real friend.
Ninety Six Gaol, the 4th of
7th mo., 1778.

Joshua Brown¹⁶

The prisoners were taken to Charleston in the custody of an under sheriff, a three days journey. Ever mindful of the concern which brought them to South Carolina, they had a meeting in Charleston Meeting House the day they arrived and two more on the following First-Day (Sunday). Here they had the liberty of the town and after appearing before the Council, the question of banishment was held in abeyance. They were then allowed to have "the liberty of the limits of Bush River Monthly Meeting." Bush River Meeting was in Newberry County. Joshua and his companions then spent nearly three months visiting some 130 families belonging to this meeting. Some six months after their arrest, the prisoners were released by an act of the South Carolina Assembly.¹⁷ Joshua's account concludes:

Although I had been so long detained, I felt my mind still engaged to visit the meetings of Friends in the old settled parts of North Carolina and Virginia which I performed pretty fully and returned to my habitation the 26th of 12 mo. 1778 with a thankful and quiet mind.¹⁸

The principle of non-involvement in military affairs which led Joshua Brown and his two companions to stand firm in the face of banishment was well stated in the oft-quoted declaration of the early

Quakers to Charles II in 1660/61.

The Spirit of Christ, which leads us unto all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any Man with outward Weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ, nor for the Kingdoms of this World.

NOTES

1. *When the Friends came to Burlington*, Amelia Mott Gummere, Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association, Vol. 17 (1928), 12.
Vital Records of Burlington Monthly Meeting, manuscript, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.
Before the Gregorian calendar was adopted in 1752, March was called First Month, April, Second Month, etc. among Friends.
2. *The Clayton Family*, Henry F. Hepburn, Papers of the Historical Society of Delaware, 1904.
History of Chester County, J. Smith Futey and Gilbert Cope, Philadelphia, 1881, 498.
3. James Brown was born 3rd mo. (May) 27th, 1656 and William 1st mo. (Mar.) 29th, 1658. *Vital Records of Wellingborough Monthly Meeting*, manuscript in Historical Library, Friends House, Euston Road, London.
See also *Bi-Centennial of Brick Meeting House, Calvert, Cecil County, Maryland*, Lancaster, 1902. The account of page 17 agrees with the original records in London. The account on page 37 incorrectly gives William as the father of the emigrant brothers.
4. *Quaker Tercentenary*, John C. Wagon, Bedfordshire Magazine, Vol. 4 (1954-5), 271. This article repeats the error that the father of the emigrants was William.
5. The East Nottingham Meeting House, at Calvert, has always been known locally as "The Brick."
6. *Bi-Centennial of Brick Meeting House*, 26.
7. *An Account of the Meetings of the Society of Friends within the Limits of Baltimore Yearly Meeting*, Levi K. Brown, Philadelphia, 1875, 25.
8. *Quaker Biographical Sketches of Minister and Elders, and Other Concerned Members of the Yearly Meeting of Philadelphia, 1682 - 1800*, edited by Willard Heiss, Indianapolis, 1972, 266-7. These biographical sketches were first published in *The Friend* (1853 - 1863). The biography of Joshua Brown, pages 266 - 296, was prepared from his own writings. Hereafter noted as *Biography*.
9. There is a picture of the Joshua Brown house on page 65 of Wallace Nutting's *Pennsylvania Beautiful*.
10. *Biography*, 267.
11. *Biography*, 295-6.
12. *Biography*, 285.
13. *Biography*, 294-5.
14. *Some Account of the Imprisonment and Suffering of Joshua Brown of Little Britain, in the County of Lancaster, Pennsylvania; who being on a religious visit to the meetings of Friends in the southern provinces, was stopped and imprisoned at a place called Ninety Six in South Carolina*. Friends Miscellany, edited by John & Isaac Comly, Vol. 9, Philadelphia, 1837. Joshua Brown's own account of his imprisonment, 279 - 288. Hereafter noted as *Miscellany*. See also *Exiles in Virginia; with Observations on the Society of Friends during the Revolutionary War. ... 1777-78*. Thomas Gilpin, Philadelphia, 1848.
15. *Miscellany*, 280-1.
16. *Miscellany*, 284-5.
17. *Miscellany*, 286-7.
18. *Miscellany*, 288.