



Quaker Meeting House and Research Library at 7 Fair Street

EILEEN POWERS, 2007

Quaker Meeting House/ Research Library

In 1838, John Boadle opened the door to the new Friend's Academy on Fair Street, a handsome purpose-built structure that would be his schoolhouse.

The two-story hip-roof building was simple but functional, with a central door on the east side facing Fair Street, two windows at the second-floor level, and a chimney front and center. Two rows of tall windows on the north and south sides allowed light into the long school-rooms: on the first floor were the desks of the older scholars, while upstairs the primary students were instructed by Boadle's assistant. An Englishman by birth, Boadle had been recommended for the job on Nantucket by Philadelphia Friends, and he arrived on Nantucket ready for the challenge. John, as he had his students call him, settled in — becoming one of the most beloved teachers in the history of island schools — and made the Fair Street schoolhouse his scholastic kingdom for almost twenty years.

Next to the schoolhouse stood a large meeting house built to serve the Orthodox Friends in 1833 after one of

ADDRESS

7 Fair Street

CONSTRUCTED

Quaker Meeting House

1838

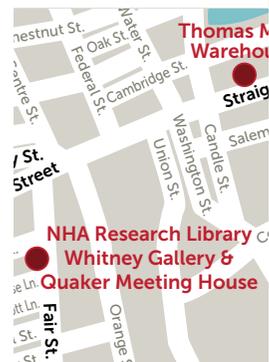
Research Library

1904/2001

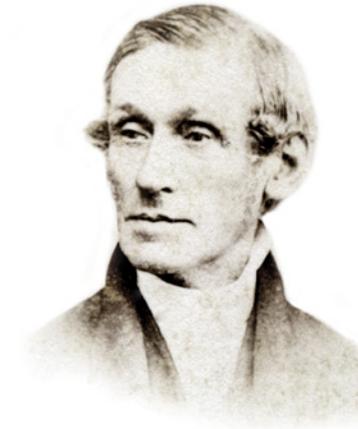
DISTANCE FROM

WHALING MUSEUM

.3 miles



the early schisms in the Society of Friends. Records show that James Weeks built the meeting house, and he may have built the schoolhouse five years later. The Fair Street meeting house was larger than the one on Main Street that later became a straw-hat factory and passed through several other adaptations before settling as the core of the Dreamland Theatre. John Boadle married Hanna Heaton of Plattekill, New York, in the Quaker Meeting House in 1854.



Quaker schoolmaster John Boadle

CDV1005

Soon after, he left Nantucket to teach in New Bedford, and his able assistant, Hepsibeth Hussey, continued the school, but in a new location on the corner of Charter and Fair Streets. By the 1860s, the number of Quakers had diminished, rendering the large meeting house of questionable usefulness; it was dismantled and shipped to Dennisport



Interior of the Quaker Meeting House, early 1900s

HENRY S. WYER GPN4313

on Cape Cod, where it was reassembled and used as a school until it burned down in 1930.

The schoolhouse at 7 Fair Street, a better size for a small population of island Friends, was reconfigured as a meeting house in 1865. Two thirds of the second floor was removed, leaving a balcony at the east end; simple bench pews saved from the old 1833 meeting house were added to the first floor; and a raised platform with bench seating at the west end of the room accommodated the elders. For almost three decades the old schoolhouse turned meeting house served as the site of quiet Quaker contemplation, but eventually only a handful of the faithful was left on the island.

In 1894, the meeting house was available for purchase. Many in the community were unaware of the history of the building, prompting Henry S. Wyer to write a letter to the editor of the *Inquirer and Mirror* and lay out the facts, summing up with the statement, "Thus it is evident that the building was identified with the Friends for about 54 years, and is to all intents a landmark and a relic of them which should



The Quaker Meeting House as headquarters of the Nantucket Historical Association, 1890s P3414



Museum collection displayed in the Quaker Meeting House, circa 1900

HENRY S. WYER P9326



be preserved to futurity." The Nantucket Historical Association had recently been organized, in May 1894, and members were actively searching for a "suitable place in which to store and exhibit the donations and loans of antique and historical articles, which already began to come in." Their June 25 meeting was held in the Friends Meeting House on Fair Street and new president, Dr. J. Sidney Mitchell, recommended buying the building in which the meeting was held, ". . . as an old and valuable landmark which would serve temporarily as the headquarters of the society, and the Council was authorized to purchase the same at once." And so the Quaker Meeting House, formerly John Boadle's schoolhouse, became the first building owned by the Nantucket Historical Association, a place for meetings and for storing the donated material that was rapidly accumulating

Just three years after its inception, the NHA recognized the need for safe storage of the treasures in its care. Recording secretary Mary E. Starbuck wrote in her 1897 report: "More than anything, we need a fireproof building. We have land enough at the rear of the Meeting-house for a brick extension of sufficient size for our purposes, and when we have such an addition many valuable relics will come back to the island. They have already been promised and for many reasons it seems expedient to claim them as soon as possible."

In 1897, the association made a pivotal decision. Rather than buying and "fitting up" a whaleship, an idea that was briefly considered but deemed too expensive, it was voted that the fund accumulating for that purpose be converted to a fund for "the most pressing need of the Association — the erection of a fire-proof building." Instead of brick, concrete was chosen as the building material by architect George W. Watson of Boston. Concrete was not a new material, in fact it was used in ancient Rome for constructing aqueducts, the Colosseum, and the Pantheon, but after the fall of the Roman Empire the art of making concrete was lost until rediscovered in the eighteenth century. It was used widely in Europe, particularly in France in the nineteenth century. Harvard Stadium was made of concrete in 1903, and the first concrete skyscraper was being built in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1904. News of that achievement came to Nantucket, and persuaded Henry S. Wyer, vice-president of the NHA, to use the aggregate material for the



Fair Street Museum, built 1904

GPN2842

proposed fireproof building. In 1904, one of the country's early concrete buildings took shape behind the Quaker Meeting House. Frank Lloyd Wright would follow suit in 1905, with his famous Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois.

The collection of artifacts and documents that had been growing for ten years was moved from the Quaker Meeting House to the new fireproof building, a task that "engrossed the whole time and efforts of our working officials during the past year, and a most strenuous year's work for Curator and assistants. . . ." wrote curator Susan E. Brock in 1905. She was happy to report that the most satisfactory part of the whole project was the restoration of the old meeting house to its former condition, as it appeared when the association purchased it in 1894, adding, "We hope to be able to preserve it forever, in its Quaker simplicity, as a type of the places of worship of our ancestors."

The NHA has done just that, and the Quaker Meeting House looks today very much the way it did in 1864. The attached fireproof building was for years known as the Fair Street Museum, the primary exhibition space of the association, with collections arranged in a "cabinet of curiosities" style on both floors of the building. The Fair Street Museum was the heart of the NHA, overflowing with everything from



First exhibition in the Whitney Gallery

JEFFREY ALLEN, 2001 T436

arrowheads to whaling logbooks, along with larger items like furniture and fire-hose carts. As the association expanded its properties in the twentieth century, however, creating additional exhibition and storage spaces, the aging fireproof building sat ripe for a new use that honored the aspirations of the founders of the NHA: “. . . that a society should be formed at once for the purpose of collecting books, manuscripts and articles of any sort, to illustrate the history of our Island. . . .”

What better place for a library and research center than a fireproof building — retrofitted, restored, and enlarged in 2001. The primary-source documents that record the history of Nantucket are housed in the NHA Research Library at 7 Fair Street. An archival vault beneath the Quaker Meeting House provides climate-controlled storage for irreplaceable original documents — logbooks, account books, family papers, journals, business records, photographs — that are made easily accessible to researchers when they visit, or through online records. The intimate Whitney Gallery at the entrance to the library offers changing exhibitions of Nantucket art and history and the light-filled reading rooms are a haven for historians, students, journalists, filmmakers, homeowners searching for information about their Nantucket houses, and genealogists filling in the branches of their family trees.



Edouard A. Stackpole Reading Room, NHA Research Library

JEFFREY ALLEN, 2001 T435