

# Elizabeth Webb

“With reference to her life and times.”

*This report is divided into three parts: The Historical Background that describes the development of the hostile situation that caused many early Quakers to leave England for the American Colonies; The experience of the Webb family Before Departure; and their experience After Arrival.*

## Historical Background

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century a revolution of reason and thought, known as the Renaissance, swept across Europe. It greatly influenced Christianity because it started people questioning their blind acceptance of guidance and dogma presented by the Catholic Church. Starting in Germany in the early 1500's by an academic monk, Martin Luther, this new thinking was named the Protestant Reformation and it resulted in a new Christianity in which the faithful in many countries no longer recognized the Pope as head of their church. The practice that Martin Luther held most objectionable was the sale of indulgencies by Catholic clergy in which church members could gain forgiveness of sins, past, present and future, by paying money to their churches. Over the centuries, this practice of selling indulgencies had made Catholic churches very wealthy.

In England King Henry V111, who claimed to rule by divine right, was experiencing frustration at being unable to have the Pope sanction the annulment of his marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. Catherine had produced one daughter, Mary, but had failed to produce a male heir to the throne. Henry considered this to be a failure on Catherine's part and petitioned the Pope to annul the marriage. The Pope refused to do this, so in 1533 King Henry, with the support of parliament, declared himself to be the Supreme Head of the Church of England and promptly had his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled. The Pope excommunicated Henry. Although the clergy of the newly created Church of England and the parliament supported Henry, Catherine did not and out of sympathy for a wronged woman, many of the English population continued to support her and the Pope. Apart from acknowledging the authority of the king, the new Church of England continued with its customary liturgy and administrative practices that had been in use under the Pope.

A second reason that persuaded Henry and the parliament to gain authority over the English church was that it allowed them to seize much of the huge wealth of the English church and its monasteries to replenish the national treasury that had been sadly depleted by continental wars and his personal extravagances.

When Henry V111 died in 1547, he was succeeded by his nine-year-old son, Edward V1, the only child of his third wife, Jane Seymour who died soon after Edward was born. Edward died when he was fifteen but in his short rein he managed to introduce a number of improvements in the liturgy of the Protestant Church of England, including the introduction of a Book of Common Prayer which was printed in English. Edward was succeeded by his half-sister Mary, the daughter from Henry's first marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Like her mother, Queen Mary had remained faithful to the Roman Catholic Church and soon set about suppressing the Church of England in favor of the Roman Catholic church. Mary's methods were brutal, earning her the nickname "Bloody Mary". More than 250 Anglican clergy who refused to recant their faith, were burned at the stake, including Bishop Hoopes, one of Elizabeth Webb's ancestors.

Queen Mary died in 1558 and was succeeded by Queen Elizabeth 1, the daughter of Henry V111 and his second wife Anne Boleyn. Queen Elizabeth was a Protestant and, with a supportive parliament, set about suppressing the Catholic Church again. She ruled until her death in 1603.

Subsequent monarchs showed more or less support for the Church of England, but parliament showed a steady support, to the detriment not only of Catholics, but of other non-conforming Protestant faiths such as Quakers.

Elizabeth Webb was born Elizabeth Hoopes to a Protestant West England family in about 1663. This was in the reign of Charles 11, a Protestant monarch with Catholic sympathies. Charles 11 reigned from 1660 until his death in 1685. During her adolescence parliament passed a series of laws aimed at restricting the practice of non-conforming faiths, particularly Catholics and Quakers. Of particular difficulty for Quakers were:

1. The Act of Supremacy (1559) – passed in the previous century by Queen Elizabeth - which required any person taking public or church office or attending a university to acknowledge under oath that the monarch was the supreme authority over all things spiritual and temporal in England. Failure to swear could be considered an act of treason.
2. Corporation Act (1661) which required municipal officials to take Anglican communion;
3. The Act of Uniformity (1662) which required the use of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer in all religious services;
4. The Conventicle Act (1664) which forbade the assembly of more than five people for a non-Anglican religious service.
5. The Five Mile Act (1665) which forbade non-conforming ministers from coming within five miles of a town in the performance of their duties.

One of the reasons that these restrictive laws were passed was that the country had just come out of a nine-year civil war (1642-1651) and the authorities viewed secret meetings with great suspicion. But these laws had a devastating effect on Quakers: it is estimated that during the period 1652-1689 about one in every three Quakers (about 15,000) were imprisoned. One can appreciate the courage it took to be a travelling Quaker minister in England in those days.

### Before Departure

The Hoopes family, into which Elizabeth had been born, were members of the Protestant Church of England. Elizabeth later wrote that by the time she was about 15, which would have been about 1678, she had become distressed with the way the priests in the established church were behaving and felt drawn to the purity of the Quaker faith. So she started attending a Quaker Meeting in the nearby city of Gloucester. Hoopes is a well-known family name in the south-west of England and many Hoopes became Quakers who eventually emigrated to America, with many settling in Bucks County. But some must have settled in or near Birmingham Township because several Hoopes show up in our Meeting's old records of members and attenders.

In 1683, when Elizabeth was 19 or 20 she became a member of Gloucester Quaker Meeting. The same year she married Richard Webb who was a wealthy farmer and a member of the same Meeting. By the time she was 24, in 1687, she had become a certified minister of her Meeting and had started her traveling ministry to other Quaker Meetings throughout England. Traveling Ministry by Quaker Women was common in those days, both in England and in the American Colonies. The book "Daughters of Light", by Rebecca Larson, prints a partial list of Quaker women who were active in the American Colonies in the period 1700-1775; there are more than 350 women listed!

By 1697 Elizabeth had been married for fourteen years and for ten of them had been a traveling minister, yet she had somehow found time to also have nine children! That same year she then made the life-altering decision to expand her ministry to the Quaker Meetings in the American Colonies. Her husband Richard, who was Clerk of their Quarter, was not happy with her proposal and initially refused to issue the needed travel certificate. But she persisted and he finally agreed. So, in the ninth month of 1697, she set sail for the American Colonies, with a companion and fellow traveling minister, Mary Rogers. Transatlantic travel in those days was slow, uncomfortable and risky, with no weather forecasts and only a simple compass to guide them. Three months later they landed in Virginia.

In the following 13 or 14 months, Elizabeth Webb traveled, with her traveling companion, all the way from North Carolina to New Hampshire visiting and/or ministering to many Meetings. It may seem extraordinary to us that she could do this, apparently without harm, but she did in fact encounter and overcome many dangers and hardships. But there was assistance from King Charles II in England: he had issued an order forbidding the Puritans in New England from harassing people of other faiths, and he had ordered that a highway, suitable for stagecoach travel, be constructed from Boston to Charleston. By the time Elizabeth Webb had arrived it had probably got as far south as Philadelphia. Further south it was probably only a track suitable for travel by horseback. This highway was called The King's Highway, but no doubt the name was changed after the Revolutionary War. Locally the road became Route 13 and went south through Wilmington and Newcastle, Delaware.

At the beginning of 1699 Elizabeth returned to England. Clearly she liked what she had seen because she persuaded her family to join her in returning to live permanently in Pennsylvania. Joining Richard and Elizabeth and their family were Richard's brother John and his family. Richard and John Webb had each suffered repeatedly both imprisonment and confiscation of property for refusing to swear oaths of allegiance. Their only option as Quakers was either to emigrate to America or to stay home and face ruin.

### After Arrival

At the end of June, 1700, the families left for America on the ship "Canterbury", the same ship that had carried William Penn on his return visit to the American Colonies six months earlier. They had with them Certificates of Removal from Gloucester Quarterly Meeting, which they presented to Philadelphia Monthly Meeting at the end of the same year.

I could not determine what happened to John Webb and his family, but Richard and Elizabeth Webb, with their children, stayed on in Philadelphia for the next three or four years, during which time Elizabeth again set out as a traveling minister through the eastern colonies. By 1704 they had decided to move to Birmingham Township where Richard had bought 415 acres of land. In 1704 the family moved onto their land with Elizabeth and the children receiving certificates of transfer to Concord Monthly Meeting. However, Philadelphia Monthly Meeting refused to issue a certificate to Richard because they did not approve of his jocular attitude and, more importantly, because of a charge brought against him by a woman that "he had over-persuaded her to drink too much rum". Eventually Philadelphia Monthly Meeting relented and a joint certificate for Richard and Elizabeth was issued at the end of 1709.

Even though Richard was not a member of Concord Monthly Meeting he could still attend meetings for worship there, he just couldn't participate in meeting decisions. Elizabeth, however could and did. She soon became the spiritual leader for Birmingham Quakers at Concord Monthly Meeting.

It was reported on 9<sup>th</sup> day 8<sup>th</sup> month 1704 in the minutes of a joint Chichester – Concord Monthly Meeting, that application was made by Elizabeth Webb and John Bennett, William Brinton's son-in-

law, on behalf of the inhabitants of the upper part of Birmingham and Brandywine Creek, to meet for worship in the house of John Bennett during the winter. Their application was granted and subsequently confirmed by the Quarterly Meeting. Birmingham Meeting has its origin in the Meeting thus established.

In 1708, James Webb, the tenth and last child of Richard and Elizabeth Webb, was born in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The preceding nine children had all been born in England. Of these ten children nine, including James, survived to adulthood. Eight were eventually married. Most, if not all of them, lived in Pennsylvania.

In 1710, Elizabeth Webb made a brief return visit to England, making this her fourth and fifth crossings of the Atlantic.

In 1717 Birmingham Quakers requested from Chester Quarter permission to meet at Birmingham all year. The Quarter approved and thus Birmingham was set to be established as a separate Meeting. Final approval as a Preparative Meeting was obtained in 1726, after the meetinghouse had been built.

In 1718 Birmingham Friends petitioned Chester Quarter to be allowed to build a separate meetinghouse. This was approved and Richard Webb agreed to sell to the Meeting one acre of land for three pounds on which to build it.

In 1719 Richard Webb died at the age of 64. His burial location is uncertain but believed to be in Concord Monthly Meeting's burial ground. He left his estate to his wife, plus one pound to each of his nine surviving children.

In 1721 Elizabeth Webb signed the deed for the sale of one acre of land, as designated by her husband, to Birmingham Meeting for three pounds. The same year the first meetinghouse was built on it from cedar logs.

In 1726 Elizabeth Webb died at the age of 63. She is buried in the burial ground behind the present meetinghouse.

In 1729 The Meeting decided that the gravestones were a form of idolatry and all were removed from their burial ground.

In 1763 The original wooden meetinghouse was torn down and replaced by the present stone one.

In 1768 The present stone wall was built around the burial ground behind the meetinghouse. It was laid out to enclose the grave of Elizabeth Webb.

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