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The Quaker Influence on Nantucket Architecture: A Case Study

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The Quaker Influence On Nantucket Architecture: A Case Study

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Program of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts

by
Anne E. Gaeta
1990
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Camille Wells

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of Quakerism on the architecture of Nantucket, Massachusetts. This examination takes the form of a case study of two houses.

It has been observed that Quakerism influenced the architecture of Nantucket Island. This case study begins with those observations and progresses from them to explore the ways in which the Quaker ethic, primarily simplicity and plainness, is physically manifested in the architectural elements of two nineteenth-century houses.
Quaker Influence on Nantucket Architecture:  
A Case Study

Nantucket is an island, removed from the Cape of Massachusetts by thirty miles. The architecture of Nantucket has a unique quality. Through the years, its manner has remained distinct from its mainland contemporaries. Styles, such as Georgian and Greek Revival, arrived on Nantucket at about the same time they gained popularity on the mainland. The manner, however, in which these styles were executed remained discrete. The appearance of Nantucket's buildings constructed in these architectural styles is subdued. Embellishments of Nantucket structures were crafted plainly, or were simply omitted. Also distinguishable on Nantucket is the cultural, historical, and most importantly, religious heritage, which is wholly separate from that of the mainland. The religious heritage, embodied in the Quaker ethic, exerted an enormous influence upon many aspects of Nantucket life. The concern of this paper is to establish and delineate that Quakerism also exerted its force on the architecture of this "Far-away Island."

It has been previously assumed that Quakerism influenced the appearance of Nantucket houses. Clay Lancaster, a scholar of architectural history, equates the term "Quaker house" with another, "the typical Nantucket house," to describe the look of Nantucket's
architecture. He argues that the Quaker ideals of "high thinking, plain living, fair dealing, honest work, simple dress, and sober and humble deportment...are apparent in the Quaker house, which is unostentatious yet adequate, which substitutes craftsmanship for ornamentation, basic comforts for luxuries, and which is un-prettied yet appealing." In their The Decorative Arts and Crafts of Nantucket, Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. and Mary Grace Carpenter also assert that among the early Quakers, "simplicity was stressed in dress, home furnishings, and architecture." They substantiate this observation with an excerpt from Frederick B. Tolles' discussion of the manner in which the house should be fitted:

As to chests of drawers, they ought to be plain and of one color, without swelling works.

As to tables and chairs, they ought to be all made plain, without carving, keeping out of all new fashions as they come up, and to keep to the fashion that is serviceable.

And as to making great mouldings one above another about press-beds and clock-cases, etc, they ought to be avoided, only what is decent according to Truth.

So that all furniture and wainscoating should be all plain


2 Ibid., p. 59.

and of one color.4

To examine how an ideological and sociological belief effected a material artifact, it is necessary to investigate non-verbal materials. In his "Style as Evidence," Jules David Prown discusses the significance of the way in which a "person of the past manipulated matter in space."5 He asserts that when an individual sculpted his physical habitat in a "particular way to satisfy his practical or aesthetic needs, he made a type of statement."6 This sort of non-verbal statement is very important to the study of a past culture. As Prown explains, "In any age there are certain widely shared beliefs--assumptions, attitudes, values--that are so obvious that they remain unstated. As such, they are most clearly perceivable, not in what a society says it is doing in its histories, literature, or public and private documents, but rather in the way in which it does things."7 One of the things any society does is create a built environment, and often, the most long-lasting and visible artifact that a culture produces is its architecture. Architecture is an effective resource with which to interpret the past, but it is a cryptic language. Exploring the influence of Quakerism on

4Ibid., p. 8.


6 Ibid., p. 198.

7 Ibid., p. 198.
Nantucket architecture requires a "Rosetta stone" to reveal its coded meaning.

One way to address the question of Quaker hegemony and its effects on the island's architecture is to establish a case study from which to derive conclusions which can apply to the macrocosm of Nantucket society as well as to the microcosm of specific examples. The case study will provide the necessary Rosetta stone: it will be the deciphering key through which to form a system of organizing meaning from information.

The case study that will be examined will begin with the observations and findings on Nantucket architecture that have been presented. It will progress from these observations and will explore the ways in which the Quaker ethic, primarily simplicity and plainness, is physically manifested in the architectural elements of two early nineteenth-century houses.

Arlene Horvath uses a case study to answer the question of Quaker influence in an eighteenth-century Pennsylvania farmhouse. Her study involves only one house, and does not discount reasons of wealth, family, and ethnic heritage, technical capability, date of construction, and location for the plainness of her building's appearance. In her study, Horvath finds that "it would be a mistake completely to dismiss the role of their [Friends] religion in reinforcing the use of the plain style," but because she cannot remove other possible reasons for plainness, her answer to the question of Quaker influence had to be that it is not
involved. 8

This study considers two houses with coincidences in form, construction, and original ownership that permit all other possible reasons for the distinctions in their appearance to be stripped away. The result is a straightforward demonstration that adherence to Quaker tenets was the cause for plainness in one of the two dwelling designs. Furthermore, a close examination of the two houses makes it possible to grasp more clearly what nineteenth-century Nantucket Quakers understood words like "decent," "plain," and "serviceable" to mean. The two houses are the Charles G. Coffin House and the Henry Coffin House located respectively at 78 Main Street and 75 Main Street on Nantucket Island. The owners of these houses were brothers who were raised as Quakers and their lineage extends back to the founding families of Nantucket. One of the structures to be examined is the house built for Charles G. Coffin, who was loyal to the Quaker tenets throughout his life. The other structure is that of his brother, Henry who, in his middle years, rejected the Quaker faith for the more lenient Unitarian Church. 9

The Coffin brothers' houses are particularly useful for the study of


Quaker influence on Nantucket architecture. Both houses were built under the supervision of the same carpenter and mason.\textsuperscript{10} The construction of the second house was completed within two years of the construction of the first. In addition, Henry Coffin used the same design that his brother had used before him, building a five-bay, two-story, central-passage, double-pile house.

The structures are situated opposite each other on Nantucket's Main Street. Furthermore, the brothers were partners in the same very successful whaling business.\textsuperscript{11} Since Main Street was the location of most of the island's wealthy merchants, the location of the Coffin brother's houses on this street, along with the fact of the brothers' shared business, discounts distinctions in wealth as the basis for differences in the embellishment of the two houses. The Charles G. Coffin House and the Henry Coffin House were both built in the 1830s. This concurrence of building campaigns eliminates any change in fashion or taste as a potential influence on the relative appearance of the two structures. Both Charles Coffin and Henry Coffin had nine children. This equality removes the requirement of family size as the reason for the difference in house size. Since both houses were built by the same craftsmen, the technical

\textsuperscript{10}The obituary of Henry Coffin, March 10, 1900, The Coffin Family Papers, Nantucket Historical Association Library, Nantucket, Massachusetts.

\textsuperscript{11}Will of Zenas Coffin, File 150, Folder 1.5, Nantucket Historical Association Library, Nantucket, Massachusetts.
abilities of the builders are the same.

Despite all of these similarities, as well as the identical Quaker family background, there are distinctions in the two structures. Though there are structural variations, the main differences of the houses are apparent in their decorative elements. Charles Coffin built and finished his house within the bounds of the Quaker rules of simplicity and plainness and Henry Coffin detailed his house according to the rules of fashion and style.

In order to affirm that the distinctions between these two structures stem from the brothers' stance concerning Quaker doctrine, an understanding is needed of the differences between their two owners. To achieve this, it is necessary to examine the history of the Coffin brothers, including their family, occupations, economic station, and religious background. By establishing that these men had the same history in all of these areas, it is possible to assume their similarity on these points. The key distinction between the two Coffin brothers, that which accounts for the distinctions in their houses, is that Charles G. Coffin adhered to the Quaker canon, while Henry Coffin dismissed it.

The world in which the Coffin brothers lived needs to be examined in order to understand the reasons for the distinctions in their houses. This world includes: the Quaker society, the Nantucket community, and the built environment of each man's house. It is the Quaker ethic, which is derived from the doctrine of the Society of Friends, that is instrumental in the analysis of the Quaker influence on Nantucket architecture. It is through the establishment of Nantucket as a wealthy, nineteenth-century
whaling town, as well as a Quaker-dominated society, that a tense duality emerges. And finally, by establishing that these houses and the circumstances of their construction are virtually identical, it is possible to eliminate all but one explanation for their distinctions in embellishment. That explanation has to do with the brothers' differing stances on the tenets of the Quaker faith.

**QUAKERISM**

In 1659 the first white settlers came to Nantucket. In that year Thomas Macy, with his wife, five young children, and two others spent their first winter on the island. The following spring, Macy was joined by other settlers who, along with Macy, had purchased the island from Thomas Mayhew. Meanwhile, the Society of Friends established its first enclave in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It was close to forty years later that Quakerism was brought to Nantucket. Thomas Macy, although not a Quaker, brought to Nantucket a tolerance that became the island standard, and allowed Quakerism to flourish. Not only did the advent of Quakerism on Nantucket alter the religious atmosphere of the island, but it had an enormous influence on its architecture.

The foundations of Quakerism lie in the Protestant Revolution. As with other sects of the reform period, the Quakers repudiated the established Church of England. Along with this rejection, the church
priests and authority figures were renounced in favor of the authority of the Bible and the conscience of the individual.\textsuperscript{12}

It was in England that George Fox brought together a group of "Friends," a term denoting a member of the Society of Friends. Their fundamental belief was that the spirit of God or the "Inner Light" is within each individual.\textsuperscript{13} The Divine is found in the soul of the believer, and every person can have a direct relationship with God. The believer is the interpreter of the Bible's meaning, and as such, the need for a minister is precluded. In consequence of the direct communication with the Divine, all men are viewed as equal under God. This undermines any justification for social distinctions.

In the seventeenth century, the word, "you" held social speciality. Consequently, the Quakers adopted the use of "thee" and "thou" in their speech. Simplicity and plainness became the fundamental rule of Quaker society. These principles were to be maintained in appearance and demeanor, as well as in speech. The non-Quakers, who were also called the "world's people," were to be avoided for their lack of restraint in these as well as other areas.\textsuperscript{14}

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The Society of Friends, as the Quakers were more properly called, suffered heavy persecution in England. In 1656, the first missionaries of the Society of Friends began their teaching in America. Only in the colony of Rhode Island were these Quakers accepted; in most other colonies, they faced active persecution.\(^{15}\) This was especially true of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Quaker belief in the Inner Light was not in agreement with the Puritan thought that was dominant in the seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony. This new, peripheral group did not require an intermediary or minister, so the established Puritan clergy felt that these outsiders, who rejected authority, would threaten their congregations and in consequence, their government in which the church and state were connected. Also in opposition to the Puritan majority was the Quaker refusal to take oaths, pay taxes to the church, and accept the hierarchical domination of the ministry.\(^{16}\) The Quakers were in a direct relationship with God; His will superseded all governmental and church rules. The Society of Friends was tolerant of differences in doctrine, but since the Calvinists believed this tolerance was a sin, the Friends' arrival in Boston was considered an invasion.\(^{17}\) The Massachusetts Puritans


feared these perceived anarchists and fiercely suppressed the practice of Quakerism.

In 1655, a law was enacted which banned Quakers from the Massachusetts Colony, and ordered that "no Quaker be entertained by any person or persons within this government, under penalty of £5 for every such default, or to be whipped." The following law was passed by the General Court in Boston on the 14th of October, 1656:

Whereas there is a cursed sect of heretics lately risen up in the world, which are commonly called Quakers, who take upon them to be immediately sent of God, & infallibly assisted by the Spirit of God to speake & write blasphemous opinions, despising government & the order of God in the churches & commonwealth, speaking evill of dignities, reproaching & reviling magistrates & ministers, seeking to turne the people from the fayth, & gayne proselites to their pithious wayes.

In 1659, the anxiety over the Quakers reached its height, and three Friends were sentenced to death. In October of the same year, Thomas Macy, who was a non-Quaker, received a summons to appear in court. He and several others were charged with the offence of "lodg[ing] the Quakers now in prison." Two of the imprisoned Friends were the men to whom Macy had given shelter: Marmaduke Stevenson and William Robinson. For his kindness Macy was fined thirty shillings. The other prisoner who was to be executed was a woman named Mary Dyer. The two men were hanged

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19 Ibid., p.15.
on an October Sunday in Boston. Mary Dyer was also placed on the scaffold, but at the last moment was granted a reprieve. She was sent to Rhode Island and admonished never to return to Massachusetts. She did return, and in the spring of 1660 she was hanged. There was one later execution that occurred in Massachusetts before Charles II, once restored to power, decreed that all Quaker trials be transferred to London. With this law of 1661, the tension eased, and Quakerism began to spread throughout New England.20

Although the tension lessened, Boston never became the center of the Quaker faith in New England. Nantucket Island was where the Society of Friends founded its new New England home. The Society of Friends was the first organized religious group on Nantucket. It is believed that in 1664, the Englishwoman Jane Stokes, was the first Quaker to visit Nantucket. The next recorded Quaker visitor to the island was Thomas Chalkley, who arrived in the spring of 1698. His missionary meetings on the island affected a great number of people. Another Friend who voyaged to Nantucket was the Englishman, John Richardson, who arrived in 1701. He stayed in the home of Mary Coffin Starbuck and her husband, Nathaniel. Mary Starbuck was the daughter of Tristram Coffin, one of Nantucket's first settlers. While on Nantucket, Richardson found that within the community, Mary Starbuck was "quite a power on the Island," and that "nothing of moment was done without her."21 Mary Coffin Starbuck must

20Dell, p. 4.

21Starbuck, p. 520.
have been as impressed with Richardson and his Quaker religion as he was with her. After he left the island, Mary Starbuck became the leader of the Quaker movement on Nantucket. His journal notes, "there are large meetings, people there being mostly Friends, and a sober growing people in the best things."  

For four years the Society of Friends held their meetings in the Starbuck house. The first Nantucket meeting house, in which Mary Starbuck served as an elder, was built in 1708. Mary Starbuck eventually became known as "The Great Woman" and "The Great Mary."  

For more than one hundred years, about half of the island's population belonged to one of several Friends Meetings. The Society of Friends flourished on Nantucket, drawing such distinguished Quaker speakers as John Woolman, and producing such influential Friends as Lucretia Coffin Mott.  

Despite its long vitality, Quakerism experienced a decline on Nantucket after 1820. During the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, disownments of Quakers from membership to the Society of

22Starbuck, p. 519.

23Gardner., p. 308.

24Dell, p. 15.

25"Notes on the History of Quakerism on Nantucket," Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Massachusetts.
Friends were executed solely for lapses in conduct. With the Hicksite invasion, however, differences in doctrinal views became the leading cause of excommunication. The several Meetings that existed before the Hicksite invasion were doctrinely consistent but were necessitated by the island's large population of Friends. After the invasion, the Society of Friends on Nantucket was separated by differences in belief.

Elias Hicks was a Quaker minister who was accused of teaching false doctrines. Some orthodox Friends in Philadelphia charged that Hicks doubted the inspiration of the Bible, the existence of the devil, and even the deity of the Messiah. Hicks denied any variance in principles with George Fox. The rally against him, however, lasted for several years and resulted in a split in the Society in many cities. The larger of the two factions in each city agreed with Hicks, although each side claimed the truth.26

Nantucket was the only community in New England in which the Hicksite movement arose. A Hicksite minister arrived on Nantucket in the summer of 1830 and conducted a meeting which was not held in a Quaker meeting house. Any Nantucket Friend who attended this meeting was disowned; many of the island's wealthy Friends were "set aside." This was the first rift to affect the Society of Friends on Nantucket. The Nantucket Hicksites established their own separate meeting, but with the eventual reduction of members, their meeting house was sold, and

26Dell, p. 21.
the remaining members joined the Unitarian Church.\textsuperscript{27}

Another movement in the Quaker sect was that of the Gurneyites. Although this group did not become fully organized until 1832, its origin was wrought in a Friends school in 1818. The Englishman, Joseph John Gurney encouraged reading of the scriptures. He believed that it was primarily through the scriptures that one should be religiously guided. Gurney prepared his sermons beforehand and read from the Bible in meeting.\textsuperscript{28} These contrivances contradicted the Quaker emphasis on spontaneous spiritual guidance. Orthodox Friends, who believed that the scriptures should only be a secondary guide and the Inner Light the primary one, attacked Gurney for his contrary views.

In 1838, the Society of Friends in America began a campaign against Gurney. Their goal was the silencing of Gurney by the London Yearly Meeting. John Wilbur of Rhode Island was chosen as the leader of the anti-Gurney movement. Wilbur was unsuccessful in stifling the Gurney movement in England. In New England also, the Gurneyites proved victorious, persuading about nine-tenths of the Quaker population.\textsuperscript{29} On Nantucket, however, two Meetings were formed, a Gurneyite Meeting and a Wilburite Meeting, but the greater majority sided with the Wilburites. The Nantucket Quakers, by siding with Wilbur who opposed the dissenter, Gurney, not only proved to be more orthodox than the mainland Friends,

\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{29}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 22.
but also held at bay the modernizing trend of the period.

With the schisms of the 1830s, the Friends tried desperately to maintain a unity within the Meeting. The rules of Quaker living were more strictly enforced, and an attempt was made to separate themselves more completely from other religious sects. Many members were disowned for marrying outside the meeting or merely witnessing the marriage of non-Friends. Another cause for disownment was deviation from the principles of the Society of Friends in "dress and address." One such person, referred to in the Nantucket Monthly Meeting records as L. H., "persisted in wearing buckles and refused to use the Quaker-preferred, 'thee' and 'thou.'"30 Another member was set aside for "deviating" from "the plainness of our profession."31 Other offenses that prompted disownment were going to sea in an armed vessel, joining the Freemasons, falling into debt, drinking and dancing.32 These frequent disownments, however, did as much as the destructive factionalizing to reduce the ranks of Nantucket's Friends.

The Society of Friends was losing its place of authority on Nantucket. Many of the island's young Friends were lured away from the Quaker meeting by the exciting preaching and music of the Methodists.

30Records of Quaker Nantucket Monthly Meeting, 1 mo., 28, 1801.

31Records of Quaker Nantucket Monthly Meeting, 7 mo., 6, 1803.

32Records of Quaker Nantucket Monthly Meeting, Men's Meeting own had Records 1789-1824.
The Universalists, with their less stringent rules, had established their organization on the island. During these years, the Unitarians acquired enough wealthy members to finish the interior of their church with mahogany. The Congregationalists, First and Second, offered cultured preaching, which the Quaker Meeting lacked. All of these were enticements which contributed to the depletion of the Friends population on Nantucket.

The 1830 Hicksite division in Quakerism broke the Nantucket Meeting into two factions. Within a few years, three different groups, the Hicksites, the Guerneyites, and the Wilburites held separate Meetings on Nantucket. This factionalizing, along with the frequent disownments from the Society of Friends, and the enticements of other religious organizations, all contributed to the crumbling of the Quaker community and the destruction of its unity on the island. The outcome was the virtual disappearance of Friends on Nantucket by 1900.

It was not simply the Quaker doctrine that had an affect on Nantucket, the Quaker ethic had an even more pervasive influence in many areas of Nantucket life. It is this ethic, which is derived from the religion of the Society of Friends, that is instrumental in the analysis of the Quaker influence on Nantucket architecture. The Quaker's primary creed of plainness and simplicity, required of all, originates from the Quaker belief in the Inner Light and the rejection of hierarchical social differentiation. For Nantucket's Quakers, simplicity meant "the absence

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33 Dell, pp. 23-24.
of all that was unnecessary, such as ornamentation in dress, speech, manners, architecture and house furnishings." Quakers, one historian asserts, "developed their own brand of dwelling." Quaker-influenced houses were unostentatious, they substituted craftmanship and basic comforts for ornamentation and luxuries. Simplicity of form was preferred to small and enriched details."34

This underlying conviction in simplicity is perhaps best illustrated by the following quotations. One woman who was raised in Nantucket prior to the Civil War wrote that once when she was a child she remarked to a playmate that she had a friend who was wealthy. An aunt who overheard the comment admonished her: "Let me never hear you refer to anyone . . . as either rich or poor!" The author concluded "That was the ruling tone" on antebellum Nantucket.35

The reprimand given by the aunt reveals the Quakers' desire for social unity and unmarked equality. Also expressing this attitude is a 1738 letter by an affluent Friend of Philadelphia named John Reynell. When ordering furnishings from London, he requested "a Handsome plain looking glass . . . and 2 raised Japan'd Black Corner Cubbards, no Red in em, of the best sort, but plain."36 In the phrase, 'of the best sort but plain,'

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34Byers, p. 173.


36Tolles, p. 128.
lies the merchants' "conflict between his Quaker instincts and his sense of his status in society."37 Also visible in this phrase is Mr. Reynell's practical resolution to this inherent incongruity.

The desire to conserve Quakerism on Nantucket is reasserted through the island's architecture. The structures of Charles G. Coffin and Henry Coffin provide material evidence of a society struggling to maintain its wholeness, but unable to withstand the divisional qualities of influential outside societies. The house of Charles G. Coffin exhibits a loyalty to the Quaker tenets in which he so strongly believed. Henry Coffin's house, across the street, embodies the influence of Europe and the desire to be fashionable. Taken together, these houses illustrate the demise of Quaker unity and the destruction of the existing pattern of their society.

37 Ibid., p. 8.
Nantucket was founded in 1659 and existed as a village until the mid-eighteenth century. It was during this later period that the industry of whaling was established on the island. Over time, the whalers, who initially captured Right whales, travelled farther abroad where they discovered the more profitable Sperm whales. Nantucket reached the height of its economic growth because of this discovery, which resulted in an extended period of prosperity and cultural renaissance for its inhabitants. This period began in the second quarter of the eighteenth century and finally disappeared by the second half of the nineteenth century. It was this new wealth, which brought with it the emergence of status consciousness and for some, the desire to be fashionable, that created the conflict between the established order of Quakerism and the new ideas of style.

During the late eighteenth century, even before its zenith of prosperity, Nantucket was an economic leader of New England. Whale oil was New England's most lucrative direct export to Great Britain, totaling 52.5 percent of all sterling earned. Nantucket whaling obtained 70 percent of

38Byers, p. 82.
the colonial catch with 50 percent of the whaling ships. Of all whale oil exported to Great Britain from New England, 51.6 percent of it came from Nantucket.39

As the whale ships began to travel to distant seas for their catch, they returned with not only the coveted sperm whale oil, but with manufactured goods and raw materials. Porcelain from China, textiles from Europe, and exotic woods from the West Indies were all fruits of whaling expeditions. As owners of the largest fleet of whale ships on the island, Charles G. Coffin and Henry Coffin were able to obtain any of these, as well as other, imported objects.40

Nantucket's long period of prosperity, which continued through the first half of the nineteenth century, was the setting for the construction of Charles G. Coffin's and Henry Coffin's Main Street houses. Charles Coffin and Henry Coffin were raised in a family that had strong community and religious ties. Their ancestry extends in a direct line back to Tristram Coffin and his son, James Coffin, both original founders of Nantucket.41 It was James' sister, Mary Coffin Starbuck, who was the

39Ibid., p. 144.


41Coffin Family Papers, Nantucket Historical Association Library, Nantucket, Massachusetts.
leader of the Quaker movement on the island. The Coffin presence on Nantucket remained strong through James Coffin's son, Nathaniel Coffin, and his son, Benjamin Coffin. Benjamin Coffin was a school teacher on Nantucket, and his son, Micajah Coffin, was a Quaker lawmaker who was a strong political and religious force within the community.

Micajah Coffin's son, Zenas Coffin, was the father of Charles G. Coffin and Henry Coffin. It was Zenas Coffin who brought the greatest amount of wealth to the Coffin family. He turned his father's whaling business into the economic success that Charles Coffin and Henry Coffin later enjoyed. Zenas Coffin owned the island's largest fleet of whale ships on Nantucket.

Zenas Coffin married Abial Gardner on September 28, 1786. Together they had eight children: three daughters and five sons. Three of their sons died by the time they had reached the age of thirteen. Charles G. Coffin and Henry Coffin were the only remaining sons, and it was they who inherited their father's lucrative business upon his death in 1828.

Charles G. Coffin was born on October 23, 1801. He married Eliza

\[42\text{Ibid.}\]

\[43\text{Ibid.}\]


\[45\text{Zenas Coffin's Will in The Records of Nantucket Monthly Meeting, Men's Meeting Records, July 8, 1828.}\]
McArthur on January 22, 1824. The couple had ten children, but one died after less than two months. After the death of his first wife, Charles Coffin married Susan Macy on January 18, 1858. Henry Coffin was born six years after his brother, on March 17, 1807. He married Eliza P. Gardner on Nov. 14, 1833. Like his brother, Charles, Henry Coffin had nine children.

In their adulthood, the Coffin brothers were greatly affected by the Quaker period of fear and factionalizing. At the Nantucket Men's Monthly Meeting of February 27, 1834, Henry Coffin was disowned. This is not surprising due to the great amount of disownments of the time, but what is telling is his remorseless response.

The committee to labour with Henry Coffin for marrying contrary to the order of our society, report they do not find him disposed to make Friends satisfaction. Which being considered, it is the sense of this meeting to disown him as a member of our religious society, with which the women's meeting unites, and Benjamin Gardner, and Charles G. Stubbs are appointed to inform him; and report to our next monthly meeting.

Henry Coffin not only felt undisposed to "make Friends satisfaction," he

46 Coffin Family Papers, Nantucket Historical Association Library, Nantucket, Massachusetts.

47 Ibid.

joined the Unitarian Church with its less stringent restrictions.

Charles Coffin, on the other hand, who also became a victim of the fear-driven disownments of the period, desired to maintain his membership in the Society of Friends, and he upheld the Quaker tenets throughout his life. The Men's Monthly Meeting of June 24, 1824 produced the following report:

According to our appointment we have visited Charles G. Coffin on account of his marrying contrary to the order of our society; and although he was desirous of remaining a member, yet he was willing that Friends should proceed according to their usual practice in such cases.\(^{49}\)

The wording of this report expresses the regret felt by the members of the meeting because of this disownment; it allowed that Charles G. Coffin, at least in spirit, remained a Friend.

THE COFFIN HOUSES

The Coffin brothers' houses are nearly identical in form and construction. Charles Coffin and Henry Coffin both had their houses built under the supervision of the same head carpenter, James Field and the same head mason, Christopher Capen. Henry Coffin, moreover, built his house in the same plan that his brother did before him. Both structures have five bays and are built to two-and-one-half stories. Both are built of brick, and each has a rear ell. The main difference in the design of these houses is the manner in which each brother chose to embellish his house with different materials and decorative motifs (Figures 1 and 2).

Edward Chappell asserts that

levels of finish represent more than the simple choice of a decorative mode, and both form and finish represent a potentially complex group of decisions with some sort of psychological, social, or cultural basis.

The decision between the Quaker desire for plainness and the more ornate fashion that is presented in European and American pattern books


Figure 1. Henry Coffin House

Figure 2. Charles G. Coffin House
is visible in the houses of the Coffin brothers. Both houses were built in the Greek Revival style, but to different degrees of embellishment. Henry Coffin's house stands on a three-course, white granite ashlar-finished base. Charles Coffin's house rests on a two-course, dark granite base that is twelve inches shorter.

There are six steps leading to Henry Coffin's front door, and the bottom two extend into a curve at the sides of the column bases. Charles Coffin's house has just five steps, and only the bottom-most step is finished with curves. These curves are more restrained in profile than are the curves of the steps on the Henry Coffin House across the street. Henry Coffin's front steps are flanked by light-colored granite column plinths. The steps themselves are of a contrasting, slightly darker shade. In comparison, Charles Coffin employed a unified dark stone for the whole step design. Even Henry Coffin's sidewalk was stylishly laid with large bluestones. Here too, Charles Coffin remained loyal to the Quaker order of simplicity: he used plain bricks, as was the norm on Nantucket's Main Street.

The way the facades of the Coffin houses are detailed also expresses the distinctions between the non-Quaker and the Quaker ideals. Henry Coffin placed a light-colored, highly contrasting, granite trim on his house, while Charles Coffin used a somber dark trim of brownstone. Henry Coffin built formal engaged Roman Doric columns of wood, which were painted white, to support the molded white entablature above his door. Charles Coffin used the same dark stone that he used for his window trim to build plain Doric pilasters which support the brownstone
cornice above his front door. The cornice above Henry Coffin's doorway contains decorative dentils, while Charles Coffin's cornice has none. Henry Coffin's front door is recessed in a two-panel door reveal, while his brother's door is set back the depth of just one panel. Henry Coffin's door frame has detailed corner blocks. The corner blocks of Charles Coffin's door frame, on the other hand, were left undecorated (Figures 3 and 4).

Henry Coffin's residence has a parapet to hide the gable ends, while Charles Coffin chose not to conceal the gable ends of his house. Henry Coffin also added a stylish balustrade set just above the eaves of the roof. This decorative device is composed of alternating sections of turned balusters and raised panels that correspond to the fenestration pattern below. Charles Coffin built no such balustrade onto his roof. Another fashionable feature which Henry Coffin employed was the construction of a cupola. Charles Coffin rejected this modishness for the more commonplace roof walk.

Although the Coffin brothers eventually had nine children each, at the time of construction, Charles Coffin had three and another due, while Henry Coffin had no children at all. Even though Charles Coffin had the larger family, it was Henry Coffin who had the larger of the two houses. He had a rear ell built to two stories, an extention that substantially increased the living space of the dwelling. His brother, Charles, built only a one-story ell.

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52Coffin Family Records, folder 150, Nantucket Historical Association Library, Nantucket, Massachusetts.
Figure 3. Front Doorway of the Henry Coffin House

Figure 4. Front Doorway of the Charles G. Coffin House
The interiors of the houses represent the same choices that the Coffin brothers made for the exterior of their buildings. Even though the houses were built with the same basic central-passage, double-pile plan, the inside of the Coffin houses, like their exteriors, reveal distinctions in structural as well as decorative development.

The front doors of both houses open into a central passage. The main elements in these passages, both structural and decorative, are the curving stair cases. In basic design, these elements are alike, but they are finished with different decorative details. The stair rail in Henry Coffin's house ends in a turned newel post. It is made of unpainted dark wood and is finished with a circular ivory button which hides its hollow center (Figure 5). Charles Coffin's stairs are finished less elaborately. Rather than a hardwood newel post that is turned on a lathe, the stair rail in his front hall ends in a spiral of unmolded balustrades that are painted white (Figure 6). The decorative patterns on the stair spandrels also express different levels of detail. The pattern on the spandrel of Henry Coffin's stairs has a sawn composition of two small unincised scrolls and a large volute connected to one another by a series of three cyma curves. By contrast, Charles Coffin's stair spandrel has a sawn design made of two unincised scrolls connected by a plainer scotia curve (Figures 7 and 8).

Although Henry Coffin built a house with the same plan that his brother had built two years earlier, Henry Coffin altered the first-floor design in an important way. Rather than copy his brother by allowing only one side of his double-pile house to be built with an open double-room,
Figure 5. Newel Post in the Henry Coffin House

Figure 6. Stair Balustrades in the Charles G. Coffin House
Figure 7. Detail of Stair Spandrel in the Henry Coffin House

Figure 8. Detail of Stair Spandrel in the Charles G. Coffin House
Henry Coffin constructed both sides of his first floor with large double-room arrangements (Figure 9).

The east side of both houses was partitioned for pantry and storage space. Charles Coffin chose to make the remaining area a double room, with large sliding pocket-doors. He used his southeast room, with its access to the kitchen and serving area, for a dining room. The northeast part of this double space became a parlor. His plan involved the partitioning of the west side of his house into smaller rooms divided by a passage (Figure 10). This created two separate rooms allowing more private space. The southwest room is the most private since it has a passage for a buffer between it and the northwest room. These rooms, with their separation from the public space of the front passage, were most likely used for family space. The rear room was probably used for a bed chamber and the front space for a sitting room.

Henry Coffin used the limited east side of his house for a double room; the northeast room was a dining room and the southeast room became a sitting room. He also used a similar layout in the more spacious west side. The west side of Henry Coffin's house, however, was not maintained for private use, but instead it was kept for public entertaining with its large open double parlor.

The woodwork in the Coffin brothers' houses reveals a striking difference in levels of ornamentation. Henry Coffin chose to fit his door and window openings with fashionable moldings and corner blocks. The trim in Charles Coffin's house is much less elaborately detailed.

The door casings in both brothers' central passages are plainly
Figure 9. First-Floor Plan of the Henry Coffin House (Gardner, 1947)

Figure 10. First-Floor Plan of the Charles G. Coffin House (Gardner, 1947)
The similarity in the woodwork of the two houses stops there. The corner blocks in Henry Coffin's east double rooms, his dining room and sitting room, are decorated with a stylized flower-and-leaf pattern. The corner blocks of the doors and windows in the large double parlor on the west side of his house are carved with more traditionally designed acanthus leaves. The corner blocks in Charles Coffin's east double rooms, also used for his dining room and sitting room, are fitted with the same traditional acanthus leaves that his brother's west double parlor has. The trim in the west rooms of Charles Coffin's house is much more plain and required much less detailed work than did the corresponding trim in Henry Coffin's house. The front west room has unornamented medallion corner blocks, and the rear west room has plain bull's eye corner blocks (Figures 11, 12, and 13).

The distinctions between the houses' second-floor door and window casings also reveal the owners' divergent stances toward ornamentation. Each of the four upstairs rooms in Henry Coffin's house has decorative corner blocks of more or less detail, depending on location. The rooms in the front of the house were more ornately detailed than those in the back of the house. Charles Coffin's second-floor trim is far more plain in comparison. The rear two bedrooms have no detail at all on their corner blocks. The front two rooms have less intricately worked corner blocks than the least decorated corner blocks of any in Henry Coffin's house.

The mantels on the fireplaces in the four main first-floor rooms in these houses also indicate clear decisions of self-representation. Henry Coffin embellished his four fireplaces with black marble from Europe.
Figure 11. Corner Block in the Southeast Room of the Henry Coffin House.

Figure 12. Corner Block in the Northwest Room of the Charles G. Coffin House.
Figure 13. Corner Block in the Southwest Room of the Charles G. Coffin House

Figure 14. Fireplace in the Southeast Room of the Henry Coffin House
Their cast-iron fire frames are heavily detailed with zinc ornamentation (Figure 14). All of the fireplaces in Charles Coffin's first-floor rooms are finished with wood, except one. This mantel in the northwest sitting room is made of a subdued grey marble and has black marble panels in the frieze. Charles Coffin's one marble fireplace lacks the decorated fire frames of his brother's four. The fireplaces in Charles Coffin's double parlor are fitted with engaged Ionic columns that support a plain frieze (Figure 15). The fireplace in the south-west room is built with unfluted pilasters and a plain frieze (Figure 16).

The fireplaces on the second floors of these houses also exhibit disparate levels of decorative detail. The fireplaces in the two front rooms of Henry Coffin's second floor have engaged Doric columns. Charles Coffin's second-floor front fireplaces have simple pilasters; in one room they are fluted and in the other room they are unfluted. The fireplaces in the rear bedrooms of both houses are fitted with pilasters. In Henry Coffin's house, one of these fireplaces has fluted pilasters and the other does not. In Charles Coffin's house, neither of these fireplaces has fluted pilasters.

Charles Coffin desired to build a material emblem of his Quaker faith. The non-structural elements of his house follow the restrictions of Quaker plainness. Henry Coffin, however, did not wish to present himself in this way; he chose decorative elements that befitted his personal experience. He had returned from a trip to Europe the year construction began on his house, and he decided that the fashionable
Figure 15. Fireplace Detail in the Northeast Room of the Charles G. Coffin House

Figure 16. Fireplace Detail in the Northwest Room of the Charles G. Coffin House
European designs were what he wanted his house to depict. According to Henry Coffin's daughter, Mary Coffin Carlisle,

Uncle Chas. was a more strict Quaker and had brown window cases and steps; my father, not so strict, had grey granite window casings and steps. Father had been to London before building; had new ideas.

Henry Coffin's house, built as was his brother's house during the period of religious schisms, displays in a material way his departure from the unity of the Quaker experience. This disruption of unity was not only against the society of his family, but it also countered the integrity of the island community. One account states that when Henry Coffin built his house he, "not being a strict Quaker, had lighter trim used on the house than was then being used on the island and also more decorative touches on the interior."


54Ibid., p. 8.

CONCLUSION

Quakerism strongly influenced the architecture of Nantucket island. In the case study of the houses of Charles G. Coffin and Henry Coffin the Quaker influence is apparent. Clearly, the Charles G. Coffin House is plainer than the Henry Coffin House. This case study removes economics, family size, period of construction, and ability of builders as the reasons for the structures' divergent appearances. Therefore, it is evident that Quakerism, with its emphasis on plainness and simplicity, is the determinant factor.

The Coffin brothers' houses exhibit the effects of the Quaker hegemony at a time when the order of the Society of Friends on Nantucket was waning. It was during the time that the Coffin houses were constructed, the 1830s, that Quakerism was breaking apart and losing its strength on Nantucket. If Quakerism played an influential role in the manner in which architecture was constructed at this period, then it is possible to argue that the distinctive characteristics of Nantucket architecture--especially that which was built before the 1830s when the dominance of the Quaker faith was unchallenged--must bear the distinct impression of Quaker tenets.

To further the investigation of Quaker influence, other case studies, conducted at different periods of Quaker dominance, could be devised. By
examining architecture at various periods of Nantucket's building history, it would be possible to chart the changing influence of Quakerism on the island's architecture.
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