

# BASS RIVER GAZETTE

A newsletter from the History Committee of the Bass River Community Library

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## BASS RIVER'S CHURCHES

### PART 1 - The Quakers

by Peter H. Stemmer

It seems strange to begin a history of Bass River's churches with the Quakers as there are no Quaker churches in Bass River Township today. There is, however, an old Friends Meeting House in Tuckerton that serves as a reminder of the Quaker presence in the area. Bass River Township was a part of Little Egg Harbor until 1864, thus the early history of these two townships are inevitably intertwined. The religious heritage of their inhabitants and their churches are no exception.

The earliest inhabitants of the area were Quakers, the most influential being Edward Andrews who settled on the east bank of Pohatcong Creek, now Tuckerton Creek, in the early 1700's. His brother Mordecai settled on the west bank. Together, they owned the land that is Tuckerton today.

It is believed that Edward started a Friend's Meeting in 1704 which likely met in his home and others, until 1709 when a small Meeting House was built on a two acre parcel of land donated by Edward for a meeting house and graveyard. For well over a century it was the center of most aspects of life in the area - religious, social, political, civic, and economic. The Quakers were the overwhelming majority of the area's population and their religion was all pervasive, much like the Mormon experience in Utah. In 1863 the old building was dismantled and a new Meeting House was built which still stands.

The Great John Mathis, Robert Allen, Stephen Cramer, and many others of the early prominent Bass River families were a part of the Quaker society anchored to the Little Egg Harbor Friends Meeting and are buried in unmarked graves in its ancient graveyard. Their names can be found in the Friends Monthly Meeting minutes which start in 1715 and provide a valuable mirror of the times for historians and genealogists.

The first Quaker church within the boundaries of today's Bass River Township was built in Bass River Neck around 1803. A small group of Friends from the Little Egg Harbor Meeting requested permission to hold a first Day (Sunday) meeting and to operate a schoolhouse, the first documented school house in Bass River Township. Previous to this Meeting House they had to travel to Tuckerton to attend meetings, a long, tedious trip by horse, wagon, and/or by foot over sand trails and roads. The journey was longer then, as the present Bass River bridge location did not exist until the mid 1820's. Travelers had to use the northern route from the present day Pilgrim Lake Campground and Old Stage Road to get to Tuckerton.

The exact location of this Meeting House and school is not known; however, it probably was located across the street from the small Cramer family cemetery adjacent to Cramer's Recycling Center on Hammonton Road (Rt 542). Leah Blackman stated in her *A History of Little Egg Harbor Township* that it was "... on the lower main road from Bass river to Bridgeport, and opposite the Uriah Cranmer place." An 1809 Burlington County road survey laying out an earlier version of Hammonton Road states "... [from] a white oak tree Standing by Amasa Mathis fence thence (6) North forty eight degrees west forty seven chains and fifty links [3,135 feet] to the crossroads between the friends and Methodists Meeting House thence ...". Unfortunately the crossroad mentioned in the road survey no longer exists.

The Bass River Neck Meeting House held meetings under the supervision of the Little Egg Harbor Meeting from 1803 through 1825. Meetings were held once a month and increased over the years to every other week, and finally to every week. The Little Egg Harbor Monthly Meeting sent both men's and women's overseers to every meeting through this 22 year period. It is not known how or when the building disappeared.

By 1824, the location of the Meeting House in Bass River Neck was felt to be inconvenient as it was not centrally located for the members. A committee was appointed in January of that year to consider an alternate location. Over the next year a lot was purchased in Bridgeport and the new meeting house was completed by August, 1824 at a cost of \$385.17. The project ran over budget, and a

\$114.00 one year, interest free note was obtained from Jesse Evans to pay all expenses. Jesse Evans was the manager at Martha Furnace and the husband of Lucy Evans, a popular and influential Quaker minister in the Little Egg Harbor Meeting. It is doubtful that Jesse was a Quaker, but he did occasionally join Lucy at a Friends Meeting as evidenced by this Nov. 23, 1813 entry in the Martha Furnace Diary: *Mr. & Mrs. Evans at Friends Meeting down in Bass River Neck.*

The Bridgeport Friends Meeting succeeded the Bass River Meeting under the continued supervision of the Little Egg Harbor Monthly Meeting. In 1827 there was a split among Quakers resulting in a breakup into two groups - the Orthodox Friends and the more liberal Hicksites. Leah Blackman reported that the Bridgeport Meeting chose to follow the new Hicksite branch while the Little Egg Harbor Meeting remained Orthodox. The *Guide of the Records of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting* indicates that the Hicksite branch of the Bridgeport Meeting was transferred from the Little Egg Harbor Monthly

(Continued on page 6)



The Friends Meeting House in Tuckerton, located behind the Shell gas station on Rt. 9, was the first church attended by the early settlers of Bass River Township. (Photo courtesy of Burrrel Adams)



The Friends Meeting House at Bridgeport, pre 1924, when a forest fire burned the delapidated building to the ground. (Photo courtesy of Burlington County Historical Society.)

## SUMMERTIME FUN

(Continued from page 2)



Ann Carr, above in a 1936 school play costume, once won the *Medicine Show Beauty Queen of New Gretna* contest. (Photo courtesy of Thomas & Judy Cramer)

into their sales pitch again. They also sold tickets to select the prettiest girl in town. The girl who had the most tickets bought for her was crowned the Beauty Queen of New Gretna. I remember Ann Carr winning the crown one year.

I don't think anyone was ever cured of their ailments by taking the medicine, but we all liked to be part of anything that came to town. We didn't want to miss anything that went on, so we all went to those outlandish medicine shows for the excitement. The crowd would heckle them, a rotten tomato was thrown a time or two but, all in all, we did have a lot of laughs and something to talk about after they left town.

Last but not least, I remember Donkey

Baseball played on the baseball diamond beside the old school where the new school addition is now located. Some of the young men would get on the donkeys and try to run the three bases. Well, they hardly made first base before they were bucked off and landed on the ground. The men tried hard to stay on, but it was almost impossible. It was hilarious to watch, especially if you had someone on the donkey you knew. I remember the night Calvin Wilson was on one of the donkeys, and he put on such a good show that his wife, Georgie, said Calvin made his debut the night of the donkey baseball game.

All these shows, rides, and parties were a part of our summertime fun if you lived in Bass River at that time. I can truly say that I am glad I was part of some of it. We know none of that old time entertainment will never be recaptured because it's long gone, and everything changes with time. Yet, we did have a lot of fun while it lasted, and it's nice to reminisce about the good times and about all the hometown folks we shared it with. It was great entertainment and left us with a whole lot of happy memories about growing up in our little town of Bass River.



When not playing Donkey Baseball, Cal Wilson (above 1951) ran the party boat *Silver Hawk* out of Oyster Creek. (Photo courtesy of Calvin & Georgia Wilson)

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A special thank you to Harold Jernigan, Clerk of the Little Egg Harbor Monthly Meeting, for his encouragement and assistance in the writing of the Bass River Quaker's article.

**Bass River Churches, Part 2, The Presbyterians, will continue in the January - April, 2001 issue.**

## BASS RIVER'S QUAKERS

(Continued from page 1)

Meeting to the Mount Holly Monthly Meeting in 1828. Its transfer to Mt. Holly is not surprising as the Orthodox Little Egg harbor Monthly Meeting would not be involved in the caring of a Hicksite Meeting. It was finally discontinued in 1840.

Lucy Evans and most of the Little Egg Harbor Meeting ministers chose the Hicksite path and attended the Bridgeport Meeting. Membership dwindled over the next few years, and Lucy Evans, the once renowned Friends minister, worshiped silently by herself until her death in 1834. Her tombstone can be found to-day in the quiet wooded area behind what was once the Bridgeport Meeting House on Leektown Road just west of the present day Chips Folly Road.

There is no mention of the Hicksites in the Little Egg Harbor Friends minutes during this time and no indication that the Bridgeport Friends chose to follow in its path. The only hint that something must have been terribly wrong is an August 14, 1828 notation which simply states "Whereas *Luci ann Evans hath had a Right in Membership amongst friends but hath so far Diviated as to join a seperate meeting set up contrary to Discipline for which she has been tenderly treated with but Neglects our Religious joining making satisfaction for which we Disown her from being a Membership untill she becomes sencible of her Error and Condemns the same to the satisfaction of this meeting which that she may is our Desire.*" It is obvious that they were sorrowful regarding what they had to do and were hopeful that she might come back to the fold.

A month after Lucy Evan's disownment John and Lydia Hallock, who had also chosen the Hicksite path at Bridgeport, were likewise disowned by the Little Egg Harbor Monthly Meeting. There were, however, no comments of regret in the minute book concerning their disownment.



Lydia Hallock's small grave marker may be found neqar the site of the old Bridgeport Meeting House, close by the resting place of Lucy Evans. One wonders if Lydia's husband John is nearby in an unmarked grave. (Photo by Elaine Weber Mathis.)

Lydia Hallock died August 20, 1830, and Lucy Evans died September 18, 1834 after which the Bridgeport Meeting House ceased to function as a Friends Meeting House. It was later used by the Methodist may be found near the site of the old Church and as a schoolhouse. Bridgeport Meeting House, close by It eventually fell into disrepair and burned to the ground in a 1924 forest fire.

The only sign of its existence today is a shallow depression in the woods that a casual observer would not notice. Thus, 30 years before the creation of Bass River Township, all physical evidence of the Quaker heritage within its present boundaries was gone.



Lucy Evans tombstone stands as a sentinel guarding the old cellar hole that was once the Bridgeport Friends Meeting House. (Photo by Elaine Weber Mathis.)