

A History of Pelham Executive Meeting



Rose Marie Cipryk
(Photo by Don Alexander)



Mildred Nelson
(Photo by Robert Nunn)

PELHAM EXECUTIVE MEETING, THE OLDEST CONTINUOUS MEETING IN CANADIAN YEARLY MEETING, HAD ITS BEGINNINGS IN THE SUMMER OF 1799 when a committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting came to Upper Canada to revisit a small settlement of Friends who had been meeting in the Niagara District. Most of the Quaker families had arrived in the area around 1793 and by 1797 had felt they were strong enough to become a Monthly Meeting. A committee had come in 1797 and observed that there was “some hope of a Meeting being opened.” The committee that came in 1799 authorised the setting up of a Monthly Meeting to be comprised of two groups — one at Short Hills (Pelham Township) and the other at Black Creek (Bertie Township).

“Accordingly, on the first of Tenth Month,

1799, Pelham and Black Creek were formally opened as Preparative Meetings, with a membership of forty-three and thirty-six respectively; while on the following day Pelham Monthly Meeting was established as the superior disciplinary meeting, with a total membership of seventy-nine”*

This Monthly Meeting reported directly to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting until 1810. By that time, Yonge Street and Adolphustown (in Prince Edward County, south of Belleville) Meetings were established and the three meetings formed the basis of the Canada Half Year’s Meeting.

Pelham Monthly Meeting met in a succession of meetinghouses, starting with one of log construction, which was soon outgrown. The original meetinghouse was replaced in 1807 by a structure “forty-four feet long, twenty six feet wide and eleven



Some Pelham Executive Meeting Friends

Front Row:

Robert Nunn,
June Etta Chenard,
Beverly Jackson.

Back Row:

Donald Alexander,
Janet Nunn,
Barbara Bucknall,
Cathy Jolliffe,
Barbara Smith.

(Photo by Chris Hitchcock of Vancouver Monthly Meeting)

feet high. There were four windows and two doors.”

The Meeting divided during the Orthodox-Hicksite separation. The Hicksite branch became part of Genesee Yearly Meeting on its establishment in 1834; the Orthodox branch became part of Canada Yearly Meeting on its establishment in 1867.

Black Creek Preparative Meeting membership joined with the Hicksite Friends of Pelham, but by 1869 Black Creek Meeting was laid down, leaving Pelham Preparative Meeting as the only meeting under Pelham Monthly Meeting.

“Since 1911, Pelham has been an Executive Meeting, that is to say, the functions of the Preparative and Monthly Meeting have been merged into one Executive Meeting” (at the call of the Clerk).*

At the time of the separation, the Hicksite Friends retained the 1807 meetinghouse and property in the Village of Fenwick, which is part of Pelham. The Orthodox Friends built a new meetinghouse, a frame one, in 1829. It was replaced on the same site in 1865 by the “Brick Meeting House,” the present home of Friends Evangelical Church (Evangelical Friends International).

The Hicksites replaced the 1807 meetinghouse with a new frame structure known as the “White Meeting House” in 1875. This property and burial ground are still maintained by Pelham Executive Meeting while the White Meeting House was moved into the village for other uses.

From 1920 to 1955, the Hicksite and Orthodox Friends met together in the Brick Meeting House every Sunday; however, they kept their individual Meetings for Business.

When Canadian Yearly Meeting came into being in 1955, Pelham Orthodox Friends did not wish to join. Pelham Executive Meeting began holding their Meeting for Worship on a monthly basis, in homes ranging from Allan and Bessie Hall’s in Simcoe, to Raymond and Mable Willson’s in Welland, to Howard and Vera Brown’s in Dunnville, to Stirling and Mildred Nelson’s in Niagara Falls. As numbers grew, the Meeting moved, first to the YMCA in Welland and then to Niagara College, also in Welland. In the ebb and flow of membership, the numbers decreased and they returned to meeting in homes, mainly in the more concentrated Niagara Falls and St. Catharines area. In 2001, as the numbers increased once again and in an effort to have a more public face, the YMCA in St. Catharines became the meeting’s home, still meeting monthly. In recent years, there have been many opportunities to meet during the month: Meeting for Worship for Business, retreats, interfaith gatherings, and of course, a Quaker favourite, meeting for eating.

Pelham Executive Meeting has never attained the membership of its original days but has continued a steady presence in the Niagara District for over two hundred years. ☺

Note: Information marked with an asterisk (*) is from *A History of The Society of Friends (Quakers) in Canada* by Arthur Dorland. Other information is from *Quaker Heritage Directory: a Project of the Canadian Friends Historical Association* (Draft 9/1999).

ADVICES AND QUERIES #5: Take time to learn about other people’s experiences of the Light. Remember the importance of the Bible, the writings of Friends and all writings which reveal the ways of God. As you learn from others, can you in turn give freely from what you have gained? While respecting the experiences and opinions of others, do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value. Appreciate that doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light that is in us all.