

History of Newtown Meeting  
**Documentation for Historic Site Application**

By Lois Mammel [1976]

Newtown Monthly Meeting owes its origin to Edward Hicks, primitive artist, who in 1815 gathered nearby Friends to meeting in the empty Court House, Newtown. Hicks himself was the first speaker in that first meeting in the old stone Court House. Previously, these Friends, members of either Falls, Middletown, or Wrightstown Meetings, had had to travel quite some distance for not only First-day Meeting but Midweek Meeting as well. Now, with the approval by Wrightstown Monthly Meeting on April 5, 1815, and by Middletown Monthly Meeting on the next day, April 6, about 200 Friends were able to meet in Newtown as an indulged meeting. An indulged meeting is one in which Friends may meet together for worship but will conduct their business in the monthly meeting in which they are recorded as members.

As is usual in indulged meetings that are large enough and strong enough, Newtown soon began petitioning Wrightstown and Middletown for permission to form a preparative meeting. The Falls members dropped their request, probably because their numbers were so few. After considerable deliberation and great caution, apparently fearing possible financial responsibility for the building of a meetinghouse, Bucks Quarterly Meeting finally granted permission on February 27, 1817, for Newtown to become a preparative meeting under the care of Wrightstown Monthly Meeting. Edward Hicks in his earnest petition assured Bucks Quarter that Newtown would carry the entire expense itself, although afterward he admitted in his Memoirs that if all his debts were paid, he himself would not be worth a cent. But he further adds, "I was present when seven rich Friends pledged themselves to build the house." Following the custom of naming a meeting after the township in which it was located, the group became known as Newtown Preparative Meeting. The transfer of 52 members from Middletown was effected on November 5, 1817, and 151 members from Wrightstown on December 3, 1817. A preparative meeting holds its own business meetings, but the business is also brought for approval before the business meeting of the monthly meeting under whose care it falls.

The main part of Newtown Friends Meetinghouse was built in 1817 on Court Street on a lot two acres and 85 perches bought from Dr. Phineas Henks for \$60. The meetinghouse, 40' x 60', was a plain, oblong structure of stone, two stories high, and was built on the typical lines of most Friends meetings of the time, especially those in the country, i.e., two entrances facing south; sliding shutters inside running north and south divided the men's (west) and women's (east) sides, affording two almost identical meeting rooms for business when closed, for the women then transacted their own business and kept their own minutes, but when opened united all in the meetings for worship; there was a raised gallery for the ministers and elders on the north side. To conserve the heat from the iron stoves a ceiling was put in which, as conjectured by the architect H. Mather Lippincott, Jr., covered the entire area, probably at the height of just below the second story windows. However, the second story had no floor at the time. A date stone of 1817 is located at the peak of the roof on the west side of the meetinghouse. No record of the cost

of the meetinghouse could be found anywhere, including the Meeting minutes. This omission and Hicks' statement that seven rich Friends pledged themselves to build it have led Newtown Meeting historians to conclude that it was built by private subscription. Judge Michael H. Jenks said that he and his grandfather Joseph Jenks distilled a quantity of apple whiskey and sold it to raise the \$100 they had subscribed toward the building, as reportedly did some others. The original deed for the lot being considered insufficient, a committee executed the first acceptable deed on January 1, 1818. Additional lots were bought later, one 50' x 75' from Rebecca Winder on February 11, 1826, for \$25 and another 50' x 80' from the heirs of Lewis Trego on January 10, 1862, for \$110, thus raising the total acreage to the present approximate 2.9 acres.

After the meetinghouse was erected Joseph Briggs was appointed to have the care of it at a salary of \$30 per year. This was later reduced to \$25 and then to \$20, which, as reportedly remarked by Harry Van Horn, is a different rate of salary progress than of today. Later, in 1820, Edward Hicks was to take over the job of sweeping it out and laying fires in the stoves in cold weather, and he also was paid \$20 per year.

South of the meetinghouse itself is the Newtown Friends graveyard where Edward Hicks was buried in 1849 in Cemetery 1, Row VIII. His white headstone, less than two feet high in accordance with Friends' practice and tradition, is located under the sycamore tree just at the left of the gate entrance. Edward Hicks was also the first minister to speak in the new meetinghouse. He was a member and prominent minister of Newtown Friends Meeting from its inception to his death. In turn Newtown Friends Meeting greatly nourished his spiritual life, as it has for many of us who follow. As stated by Eleanore Price Mather, "... it would be hard to overstate the profound relationship between his religion and his art. In the entire history of painting we can scarcely find an artist, from Fra Angelico down, whose work was more intimately involved with his religious traditions and convictions" than that of Edward Hicks "now recognized as America's foremost primitive painter ...."

The first addition on the property was horse sheds built in 1819 north of the meetinghouse. An organizational change occurred on February 24, 1820, when Newtown Preparative Meeting and Makefield Preparative Meeting were joined together for business purposes under the name of Makefield Monthly Meeting. These business meetings were held alternately at Newtown and Makefield.

First-day School was begun in Newtown on June 29, 1867, in the parlor of the first superintendent, Dr. Lettie A. Smith, in her home on Court Street. There were two classes of children, 14 in all, of whom five were Friends, and an adult class of six or eight Friends led by Dr. Benjamin Smith. As reported by Robert Kenderdine, "The number of members so increased that roomier quarters were needed, and, permission being granted, the meetinghouse was then used."

The first recorded alteration to the meetinghouse was the building in 1868 of a portico on the south side, with stone flagging, at a cost of \$394. The south and east porticos appear to have been built at different times, for the roofs were dissimilar until 1911 when the east portico was rebuilt to correspond with the one on the south. Thaddeus Kenderdine notes

that up to 1827 there had been but \$4.25 spent for cushions, but for all that Newtown Friends raised their share of \$3000 for the benefit of North Carolina Friends for their losses from manumitting slaves; in 1832 they raised their full share towards building Spruce Street Meetinghouse, in the meantime all but a few sitting on hard benches!

Then several other significant changes occurred. In December 1892 for the first time, joint business meetings of men and women were held. The women's minutes are curiously silent on the background of this merger. One clue in the men's minutes does suggest that it must have been discussed for some years previously, for on December 2, 1886, their minute heading suddenly changed from "At Newtown Preparative meeting of Friends..." to "At Newtown Preparative meeting of men Friends ...." Then on December 1, 1892, occurs the single sentence entry, "The preparative meeting of men and women Friends have agreed to meet in joint sessions hereafter." Then the sliding shutters dividing the two sides were removed, although the lower section of the partition was left in place. Also, some seating changes were made about this time. On January 3, 1895, the seats in the northwest side of the house were turned to face east instead of south as formerly, and on July 2, 1896, the seats in the northeast side of the meetinghouse were turned to face west instead of south as formerly. The First-day School found it needed further accommodations. Also, the influx of George School students and teachers since the school's opening in 1893 greatly increased attendance at First-day meetings. Therefore, it became necessary to remodel the interior of the meetinghouse to provide more space. So shortly after the turn of the century all of the partition was removed; the second story over the benches of the main body and the eastern and western benches, thus forming a squared U-shape, was floored over, ceiled, and the walls plastered; sliding glass windows were installed that could be raised so the worshipers seated upstairs could look down through a "well" to the elders and ministers sitting below in the first floor north gallery; the stairways were built in the southeast and southwest corners. The old ceiling must have remained in place on the north side just below the second story windows, extending out over the gallery and coming to the new sliding glass windows where the opaque and clear glass divide, for on November 3, 1904, the superintendent of the First-day school asked that the Meeting "provide more ventilation by opening the space now floored over in the center of the Meeting House." The old ceiling then was raised to above the second story windows to correspond with the new second story ceiling. Molding partitions divided the second floor into rooms for First-day School classes.

As the custom of having Meeting suppers became increasingly popular for raising money for Friends Association, American Friends Service Committee, and other charitable purposes, as well as providing lunches for attenders to Quarterly Meeting and other gatherings, facilities had to be provided for that purpose. Accordingly, a well-equipped kitchen was built, probably in 1911, on the second floor on the east end, centered over the porch.

Eventually Newtown and Makefield Preparative Meetings decided to apply to Bucks Quarterly Meeting for permission to form two monthly meetings. This was approved on May 27, 1926. At the same time Newtown Preparative Meeting agreed to continue to meet, doing so "once in three months on the Fifth day preceding the monthly meeting ...." However, on August 8, 1940, having decided that Newtown Monthly Meeting and Newtown Preparative Meeting were for all practical purposes one and the same, Newtown

Preparative Meeting was laid down. With the death of Mary Bonsal, the year 1940 also marked the end of “singsong” ministry in Newtown Meeting.

Newtown Friends School was founded in 1947 by Newtown Meeting. This elementary school, located just south of George School, today remains under the care of Newtown Meeting.

In 1948 Newtown Monthly Meeting (Hicksite) under Bucks Quarterly Meeting (Hicksite) also became a United Monthly Meeting under Burlington and Bucks Quarterly Meeting (Orthodox). Thus, Newtown Meeting was one of those taking the initiative in attempting to heal the unfortunate breach that occurred in 1827 in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and spreading thereafter into other yearly meetings as well. During the split Makefield Monthly Meeting was the only one in Bucks Quarter where the Orthodox had not effected a permanent organization (their own monthly meeting) for the Orthodox numbered only three adults and three children from Newtown Preparative Meeting and three adults and six children from Makefield Preparative Meeting. In 1955 the two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings reunited.

During the summer of 1952 further physical improvements were made by building on each side of the kitchen—a classroom for the First-day School and a men’s toilet room. A connecting stairway led to the new kindergarten room on the first floor, which had been made by enclosing all of the east porch. A modern women’s lavatory was also provided in the place of the old.

Another significant increase in attendance required the building in 1957 of an annex, comprising five First-day School rooms, a new kitchen, and a complete new heating system for both the old meetinghouse and the annex at the cost of \$26,674.

A fire, which started in the southwest corner of the main meeting room on January 21, 1957, blistered the interior paint and charred some benches, thereby necessitating some renovations in that room. Over the years, the Women’s Group, begun in February 1949, provided new seat cushions, furnishings for the annex, and kitchen equipment by putting on fairs and bazaars; this was in addition to outreach projects such as collecting tons of clothing for the American Friends Service Committee for distribution abroad and yearly contributions to Friends Neighborhood Guild.

On November 13, 1967, Newtown Monthly Meeting of Friends became incorporated in order to remove the Trustees from personal liability while discharging their duties and is now known as Newtown Monthly Meeting of Friends, Incorporated. As of October 1976 it is still a thriving religious society with 170 members.

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