

For the Honor of Truth:
The Experience & Resulting Educational Views of Friend
Moses Brown (1738-1836)
of Providence, Rhode Island

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Introduction

Writing to the New England Yearly Meeting for Sufferings on 4th day, 5th month, 1814, Moses Brown offered the following:

Dear friends:

As my feeble state of health prevents my attending the Meeting at this time, I thought best to inform you, that in my confinement by bodily indisposition for some time past, the subject of the Yearly Meeting's School has been renewedly brought under my consideration, and believing that a permanent institution for a guarded education of the rising generation will be promotive of their usefulness in society and the honor of Truth, I have for the furtherance of these desirable objects, concluded to give a tract of land on the West part of my homestead farm, containing about Forty-three Acres for the purpose of erecting suitable buildings for the boarding School thereon. If the Meeting should appoint a Committee to view the ground, consider the proposal and report their prospect to the next Meeting for Sufferings, which may be more generally attended, they can then Act upon it, as it shall appear to them best. You will however dispose of the proposal in this or any other way that appears to you best. As treasurer of the School fund, I may for your information mention that its present amount is about Nine thousand three hundred Dollars. With desires that this important subject may be considered and proceeded in conformably to the mind of truth that we may hope for its blessing.

I conclude your affectionate friend,

Moses Brown¹
Relationship Of The School & Yearly Meeting: 2008-2009

¹ Rayner Wickersham Kelsey. *Centennial History of Moses Brown School, 1819-1919*. (Providence, R.I.: Moses Brown School, 1919), p.46.

By means of the action taken by Permanent Board of the New England Yearly Meeting of Friends on Saturday, November 15, 2008, Friends are embarked on path that will – if approved at the next General Sessions, August 2009 – give permission for the Board of Overseers of Moses Brown School to proceed toward its goal of gaining a separate incorporation under the laws of the state of Rhode Island.

The present legal structure has been recognized as limiting for the Yearly Meeting, but most especially for the school. This recognition by those most directly involved as been one matter, finding unity by Friends at the August sessions has proven to be quite another matter.

However in the current financial market for bonds, the confusion caused by this legal relationship has turned out to be very costly. Friends listening to the time, expense, and stress caused to the leadership of Moses Brown School due solely to the school's unclear corporate status, were ready to recommend that the Yearly Meeting move ahead on the matter.

Should this release and agreement meet with Friends approval, it would mean that Moses Brown School, can move ahead toward its goal of being recognized as fully independent Friends school. Moses Brown School of Providence, Rhode Island has been recognized as an incorporated part of New England Yearly Meeting since 1826.²

To guide and encourage a continuing and productive relationship, New England Yearly Meeting of Friends and the Board of Overseers of Moses Brown School have charged a joint committee - recently renamed "Committee for Nurturing Friends Education at Moses Brown School" - with transitional responsibilities. This ad hoc committee is engaged in an important enterprise at a critical turning point.

Both during and -it is hoped - long after the projected legal work is finalized, this joint committee will work to (1) “discern best practice of the Yearly Meeting’s long-standing commitment to education”; (2) “nurture the School’s ongoing interest in having a meaningful relationship with Quakerism today”;

² Providence, Rhode Island, “*Friend Moses Brown’s Deed of Trust of 1826*” (Registry of Deeds, Book 42, pp.400-402).

and (3) “foster the Yearly Meeting’s desire to understand, appreciate, and support Moses Brown School.”³

Over the past three years a new relationship has grown which might be characterized as partners in a joint concern. Through this growing relationship, there is a recognition that we can now attend to that which each party does best. In New England Yearly Meeting’s case, it can better attend to the spiritual care and nurture of our youth through education at Moses Brown and through its other New England Friends schools. And in Moses Brown School’s case, it can attend to the demands of running an ever more challenging business for the education of youth, both for Quakers and for the great majority who are not Quakers.

Question of Moses Brown’s ‘Original intent’:

One of the more provocative questions raised regarding the proposed changing relationship of Moses Brown School to New England Yearly Meeting has been the question of establishing Moses Brown’s ‘original intent.’ The question for the school and for the Yearly Meeting is the same: if we move to separately incorporate the school as an independent entity are we honoring Moses Brown’s original intent?

Part of the answer to this question can be found in the text of Moses Brown’s initial letter proposing the gift of 43 acres of his Providence farm as the site for a Friends Boarding School. In making this offer, Moses Brown encouraged that Friends “dispose of the proposal in this or any other way that appears to you best.” He encouraged Friends to consider this proposal but do so “conformably in the mind of truth that we may hope for its blessing.” Moses Brown further encouraged New England Friends to discern or what in the parlance of his day, Moses called being in “comformity with the mind of truth.” To do so will sustain the hope that if this conforms well with truth, then “we may hope for its blessing.”

My intention here is to explore Moses Brown’s intent in extending and the Yearly Meeting’s intent in accepting this offer. My hope is that through a better understanding of Moses Brown’s experiences with what he termed ‘Honoring Truth’ and his own evolving understanding of what constituted a ‘guarded’

³ New England Yearly Meeting & Moses Brown School Representatives. *Report of the Ad Hoc Moses Brown School Project*. (New England Yearly Meeting Offices, Worcester, MA., June 12, 2007), p.3.

education for Quaker youth, we gain greater clarity...and with that clarity reach a deeper sense of resolution about the path we are traveling.

Through discussions to date, two questions arise: (1) what did Moses Brown mean by the phrase the 'Honor of Truth'?; and (2) what was Moses Brown's understanding of a guarded education for children of Friends in New England? I begin this quest for greater clarity by offering a summary capsule of the moral and religious experiences that gave shape to Moses Brown's life before making this generous offer in May 4, 1814.

Portrait of Moses Brown:

Moses Brown. stood just a little over 5 feet tall and remained trim, energetic, and mentally sharp throughout all of his nearly 98 years. His memory was detailed right to the end. This is not to say however that he enjoyed great health throughout - far from it. As we can see from the opening lines of the 1814 letter, Moses at age 76 had been in ill health –bodily- for some protracted period of time.

Moses suffered bouts with depression, and one of these bouts lasted several months. In one particular time period, Moses was visited with both a debilitating depression combined with a mysterious physical ailment that at best was diagnosed as a form of palsy.⁴ Given the fact that Moses came through this and other such chapters in his exceptionally long lived life and you have a portrait of resilience born of an ever renewing faith in God.

From the beginning of making his commitment to Friends, Moses adopted the plain dress of Friends. He wore a broad brim hat both in and out of buildings, both in the hot and humid weather of summers in Providence and throughout the often bitterly cold winters. Though in the latter case and especially in late years, Moses did make a small concession of wearing a knit woolen cap under the broad brimmed hat to aid his poor circulation. I'm including a lithograph of Moses in his last decades sitting at his desk at the Friends Boarding School – please note the knit cap.⁵

⁴ Charles Rappleye. *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, The Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), pp. 77, 192-193.

⁵ W. J. Harris *Moses Brown, 4 July 1936 – Steel Engraving from Drawing* (Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Brown). Last accessed on 21 November 2008.

When the situation demanded, Moses did not lack for either physical or moral courage. There are many wonderful stories carefully drawn in Charles Rappleye's **Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution** that I encourage all to explore. Despite that it would be safe to say, he was by native disposition an introspective, intuition driven, and private person. Thus during the last thirty years of his life, i.e., 1806-1836, he retreated from the larger stage of politics and business to devote himself a long series of good works. Chief among these was the successful launch of a Friends Boarding School in Providence.

Moses Brown's own formal schooling ended at age 13, but largely through the good offices and example of his mentor Friend Stephen Hopkins – signer of the Declaration of Independence and Governor of Rhode Island - Moses developed a life long love of reading. He read the English sages of his time, mastered geometry, Latin, and was an able student of contemporary medicine. He was able and careful student of both the Scriptures and Friends' view of the Scriptures.⁶ He read widely from the collected works of the first generation of Friends. He accumulated a considerable library and left a legacy of writings – chiefly letters - that has been successfully catalogued, but had not been fully exploited for its riches.

The Transformational Vision

The key experience that gave shape, drive, and lasting purpose to Moses Brown's life came in February 1773 at the age of 35.

Moses and Anna Brown were married at their ancestral First Baptist Church of Providence on January 6, 1764, by the Reverend Samuel Wilson. Anna was the daughter of Moses's uncle Obadiah Brown. From all reports, Anna was small and frail with what was termed then a 'delicate constitution.' She did not fare well through her three pregnancies. Nonetheless, it came as a shock when Anna's health at age 28 turned dramatically for the worse and doctors could offer no remedies.

For the months leading up to Anna's death, Moses and Anna has sought the comfort and support of the ministry provided by the Providence Monthly Meeting of Friends where Anna had been attending for some period of time.

⁶ Moses Brown. *Texts (Biblical) Shewing the Influences and Operations of the Spirit*. Guide to the Microfilm Edition of Papers of the American Slave Trade: Series A – Selections from the Rhode Island Historical Society: Part I: Brown Family Collections. (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, n.d), Microfilm Reel 19, p.52.

This was marked departure for any member of the extended Brown clan. The Browns of Providence had been founding members of the Baptist Society of Providence and stalwart members for over one hundred years.⁷ Throughout this period, while both Anna and Moses remained members of the Baptist Society of Providence, they found comfort and solace in the silent worship of Friends who came to Anna's bedside.

The months following Anna's death on 5 February 1773 were some of the most difficult in Moses' life. Like most believing Christians of his time, Moses viewed the death of his beloved wife as a divine retribution for his sins. In a very real sense, this death of his wife seemed to demand a death of some part of Moses. He prayed fervently to be given clarity on what that sin might be.

In Charles Rappleye's view, Moses' clarity on what that sin was came at a specific moment and with dramatic impact. Rappleye states, "According to lore, the revelation came to him in a flash, upon 'returning from the grave of his wife and 'meditating upon the Lord's mercies and favors, and seeking to know what the Divine will was concerning him.'

The answer to Moses Brown's agonizing question came in a vision. Moses reported, "I saw my slaves with my spiritual eyes plainly as I see you now and it was given to me as clearly to understand that the sacrifice that was called for of my hand was give them their liberty." Moses did not question or challenge the "sacrifice that was called for."⁸

Honor Truth Given In the Vision

One hundred years earlier, George Fox had been willing to endure more than 31 months of incarceration in one of the abysmal English jails, because he refused to swear the required oath of allegiance or to swear at all. Fox and early Friends went to jail rather than dishonor that truth which is before all oaths. Here we can plainly see one of the early estimates of the costs of giving honor to Truth.

Following his spiritual vision of the humanity of his own slaves, Moses Brown gave up his lucrative business partnership with his brothers, released his slaves which represented a significant portion of his present wealth, and then began a

⁷ ----- . *The Chad Browne Memorial: consisting of genealogical memoirs of a portion of the descendants of Chad and Elizabeth Brown: 1638-1888.* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1888), p.37

⁸ Rappleye, p. 130.

single-minded three decade advocacy for the abolition of slavery. In this commitment and the sacrificial actions taken, here too we can see the costs involved in giving honor to truth.

Moses Brown's spiritual awakening, his startling vision of his slaves's humanity, came months following the death of John Woolman in 1772. Twelve years earlier from the point of this vision, there could not have been a greater contrast between the actions and views of one John Woolman and those of Moses Brown.

During this period while John Woolman worked to convince Rhode Island Friends on the question of owning slaves, Moses Brown was working with his brothers to build and then send a ship called the Sally to Africa to secure more slaves. The scale of human suffering connected to this one tragic voyage of the Rhode Island built and manned sloop the Sally must be read carefully to begin to grasp the true horror of the American slave trade.⁹

Quaker Abolitionist

Following this convicting vision, Moses Brown established a lively correspondence with Anthony Benezet of Philadelphia (1713-1784) who served both as an publisher and educator. Although not nearly as well known or recognized as an early abolitionist alongside of contemporary John Woolman, Benezet must be given great credit for transforming Friends's practices and beliefs on slavery.

For the 'honor of Truth' then Moses Brown sought to right the great wrongs in which he had participated and benefited financially. Moses sought to do this by freeing his slaves, but much more, he worked ceaselessly for their welfare following their release. Moses set up individual bank accounts for each of his former slaves. He worked to support them as they worked to gain training in a trade and corresponded with them as they sought advice and support. In one case, Moses agreed to help underwrite the construction costs for an African American Baptist house of worship in Boston.

For the 'honor of Truth' Moses worked ceaselessly for the abolition of slavery in all its forms, first in Rhode Island and then subsequently for newly formed United States of America, In 1792, Moses journeyed to Washington, in the company of Friends and supporting abolitionists, to seize the opportunities

⁹ Rappleye, *The Sally*, pp.53-75.

afforded by the spirit of liberty alive in the country. Moses Brown first plead his case with James Madison and then directly with president George Washington.¹⁰ The culmination of these three decades of writing, lobbying, legislating, and ecumenical organizing came with the successful passage of the US Slave Trade Act of 1794.

Although these measures were fought fiercely by his own brother John Brown, and likewise, by others who were benefiting from this very lucrative trade and thus, subsequently increasingly violated, nonetheless Moses Brown's had succeeded where few believed anyone could. This early success was an instructive and inspirational marker event.

Patrick Henry's Assessment of Quakers & Their Abolitionist Work

To gain an appreciation of the impact of this work, consider the following letter of Patrick Henry (1736-1799) who is still regarded as one of the most influential advocates of the American Revolution. In this letter, Patrick Henry is both thanking Robert Pleasants a Friend and fellow Virginian for sending him a copy of Anthony Benezet's reasoned case for abolition of slavery and offering his typically bold and honest assessment of Benezet's case itself.

A copy of this letter was subsequently sent from an unknown person – perhaps - Pleasants to Anthony Benezet who in turn sent it to Moses Brown of Providence. Much later, William Lloyd Garrison came into possession of it and included it in collection that he published under the title of **The Abolitionist – or Record of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (Boston: Garrison & Knapp, 1833)**.

Henry wrote the following:

“Every thinking honest man rejects it (the slave trade) in speculation, how few in practice, from conscientious motives. The world in general has denied your people a share of its honors, but the wise will ascribe to you a just tribute of virtuous praise for the practice of a train of virtues among which your disagreement to Slavery will be principally ranked. I cannot but wish well to a people whose system imitates the example of Him whose life was perfect, and believe me I shall honor the Quakers for their

¹⁰ Augustine Jones. *Moses Brown: His Life and Services – A Sketch*. (Providence, The Rhode Island Printing Company, 1892), p.35.

noble effort to abolish Slavery. It is equally calculated to promote moral and political good.”¹¹

If Patrick Henry was unsparing in his condemnation of slaveholding, he was equally unsparing in describing his own continuing culpability as a slave owner.

Concern for Quaker Youth

Moses Brown was a very successful businessman. Whether it was the production and sale of whale oil based candles, developing markets for Rhode Island products, developing an iron ore smelting production in rural Rhode Island, or later, the founding of America’s first cotton mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, Moses knew how to make a buck¹². More importantly, Moses knew how to invest and save his accumulating fortune, so that throughout his life he could devote his good fortune to the good fortune of others.

So when Friends across New England were caught in the withering political, economic, medical, and even military cross fire between the English forces and the American forces (chiefly in the severe winter of 1777-1778) Friends responded by instituting a Meeting for Sufferings. They asked Moses to head it up. In this role, Moses traveled to all the New England Monthly Meetings impacted and he offered much more than sympathy. He distributed real monetary aid to boost their flagging fortunes.¹³

Throughout his travels among New England Friends what he saw alerted him. He saw that most New England Friends were not only increasingly destitute, but they were also illiterate. For Moses what was far worse, he saw the children of Friends without any opportunity to draw upon the richness of the faith for which they were suffering.

Post-War Friends Boarding School Trials

¹¹ Editorial Committee. *The Abolitionist: or Record of the New England Anti-Slavery Society*. (Boston: Garrison & Knapp, 1833), p.155.

¹² “Moses Brown wrote to Samuel Slater, December 12th, 1789: ‘Come and work our machines, and have the credit as well as the advantage of perfecting the first water-mill in America.’” Augustine Jones. *Moses Brown: His Life and Service*. p.27.

¹³ “Moses Brown, with his committee of Friends, aided three thousand and thirty families in different places, consisting of six thousand nine hundred and twenty-three persons. The Friends of Philadelphia furnished for the purpose \$12,700 in addition to donations from New England. They followed the whole coast from New Hampshire to Newport, including the islands of the sea.” Augustine Jones. *Moses Brown: His Life and Service*. p. 34.

Out of his experience, Moses and several other leading Friends in New England, determined to establish a boarding school. Moses might well have asked himself the following: “How could Friends in New England honor Truth, i.e., the truth that informs the principles of the Society of Friends when the journals, collected writings, and history of this movement were unknown, or if known, unreadable?”

Following the conclusion of the American Revolution Moses worked with other committed New England Friends to launch a boarding school for these needful post war Quaker youth. The first attempt beginning in 1784 lasted a few years, and then a little later, a second effort also failed. Both failed for reasons that Moses himself was careful to analyze, record, and remember. Keeper of the Dream

Moses Brown agreed to being the Meeting for Sufferings trustee/treasurer for the few hundred dollars left over from these two early failed efforts. By skillful investing, Moses was able to grow these funds over the next 30 years – until the time was right to try again. That time was 1814 when he determined to combine the accumulated \$9,300 in the trust fund with a gift of 43 acres. For 30 years, he waited and worked to realize his dream.

During these same thirty years, Moses worked to better grasp the thinking of both English and Philadelphia leaders in a movement to establish local Friends schools. He corresponded with John Fothergill the founding father of English Friends school at Ackworth. The success of Ackworth served as the model for what would become Friends Boarding School of Providence.

Regarding the curriculum and ultimate aim of this boarding school, Moses Brown early corresponded with Anthony Benezet of Philadelphia to explore his thinking. Moses - being the practical and hard working business man that he was - saw this school in that light. He was of two minds on the need for the classical curriculum. While he was often student of the classics himself and advocated this for others, nonetheless he was chiefly concerned that graduates be able to take their place in the business world.

Key to the Dream: A Guarded Education

Moses – like the reforming generation of which he was a leading member - became convinced that it was possible to raise up the good in young people, but only if they were given a guarded education. In net effect, this was not a sectarian move to remove children from the sins of the secular world, but rather a strategic move to enculturate children in a way of life.

There are two ways to view what Moses and others were seeking in a guarded Friends education. The first aim was to encourage an orthodox view of Quaker life and practice. In this sense, a guarded education was protective. The second aim was to equip Quaker youth to better engage the world by being grounded in their own faith.

To reiterate Patrick Henry's view, "The world in general has denied your people a share of its honors, but the wise will ascribe to you a just tribute of virtuous praise for the practice of a train of virtues among which your disagreement to Slavery will be principally ranked."

Moses and his fellow Quaker founders and philanthropists, were not the least bit afraid of tackling the challenges of the world that surrounded them. They were convinced however that you needed to have sufficient experience in the principles, practices, and moral views of the Religious Society of Friends in order to be able to critique, and then to create an alternative to, the practices of the larger society.

Friends in New England & Moses Brown's Son Respond

Moses Brown's persistence in seeking to realize a dream over a 30 to 40 year period is another way to describe what it means to 'honor truth.' This persistence might be ascribed to an inveterate optimist, but it was a hope born of faith, not an optimism born of success. In fact, Moses exhibited some real ambivalence about the effectiveness of a Quaker inspired education.

During his life, he suffered great personal losses: his father at the age of 6; the untimely and often mystifying deaths of all three wives; and the early death of his only son, Obadiah Brown. He worked to avert and to mediate several notable controversies that threatened to tear Friends apart. Through it all, Moses' faith deepened and his hope for the rising generation following the founding of the American republic increased.

Still despite this act of exceptional stewardship and generosity, New England Friends would have to respond to Moses Brown's initiatives. Key to the lessons learned from the first two failed attempts could be found in the lack of enthusiasm on the part of Friends and their unwillingness to contribute financially. Clearly they could not move forward to build the school unless the capital needed was more than doubled the \$9,300. New England Friends did

respond and the capital needed was sufficient to begin the construction. Moses was elated. It is important to note however that it was Moses who paid out of pocket to keep the construction of the original building on track.

Fortunately for all, the blessing needed to insure the long term sustainability of this long held dream of boarding school for New England's Quaker youth came from the bequest of Moses Brown's son. Obadiah Brown shared in the same faith and hope; he had attended one of the earlier Friends schools. Obadiah Brown gave Friends a gift of \$100,000. to support this fledgling school and this gift became the largest gift to either a preparatory school or college up to that point in American history.¹⁴

Conclusion

Throughout his life, Moses Brown was well acquainted with devastating grief and the reality that death could approach suddenly. You can hear this acceptance and wisdom in a prayer that he offered at Providence Meeting, 5th day, 7 month, 1807 at 12:00 o'clock.

“Most gracious Father if consistent with thy Holy Will, I humbly beseech thee in mercy to look down from thy holy Habitation on me a poor unworthy creature. Do with me as seemeth good in thy sight, make me as thou would have me to be and when thou O Lord seest fit to remove me from this state of probation most dearest Father will thou be pleased to admit me as one of the least into thy Glorious Kingdom wherefore I resign all unto thee, not my will but thine be done.¹⁵”

Fortunately for generations of students and teachers at Friends Boarding School - 1904 renamed the Moses Brown School - Moses Brown's 'dearest Father' was not ready to remove him from his state of probation. His longing for admittance into the "Glorious Kingdom" would have to wait another 30 years. It was during those 30 years that his long held dream of a guarded education for the honor of Truth was to be realized.

¹⁴ “His son Obadiah, died in 1822, leaving to it by far the largest bequest in one sum, which had been given to any school or college in this country.” Augustine Jones. *Moses Brown: His Life and Services*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Moses Brown. *Prayer offered at Providence Monthly Meeting, 1807*. Guide to the Microfilm Edition of Papers of the American Slave Trade: Series A – Selections from the Rhode Island Historical Society: Part I: Brown Family Collections. (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, n.d), Microfilm Reel 19, p.53.