



# Quaker Hill Quill

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## Warner Mifflin: A Founding Father of Abolitionism

by Michael R. McDowell

For those under the impression that the American movement to abolish slavery began in the 1830s, it may come as a surprise to learn that there was an earlier anti-slavery movement during the eighteenth century. What may be equally surprising to Delawareans is that one of the most vigorous opponents of slavery and the oppression of African Americans during the founding era was a Delaware Quaker, Warner Mifflin. Mifflin, a second cousin to the American General and Pennsylvania governor Thomas Mifflin, labored for the liberty of African Americans by peaceful means. As an elder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), he lobbied the legislatures of Delaware, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, and also the US Congress on more than one occasion. The successes and failures of Mifflin's anti-slavery efforts provide a valuable insight into how Delaware and the country grappled with the issue of slavery during the founding era.

During the Eighteenth Century several leading political, religious and other figures gave conditional support for the abolition of slavery, almost always advocating gradual abolition. In many cases, this support amounted to little more than lip service. However, Mifflin gave most of his adult life in both time and other resources to the anti-slavery cause, and the assistance of both enslaved and free African Americans, calling this service no more than his duty. Though Mifflin assured George Washington and others that he was promoting a gradual abolition of slavery, he insisted that the passage and implementation of such a plan should be done immediately.

Mifflin was born on August 21, 1745, to Daniel and Mary Mifflin in Accomack County, on the shore of Chincoteague Bay in Virginia. Since he was the oldest child, his first playmates were likely the several black children enslaved by his family. On most Virginia plantations white and black children played together. Mifflin likely developed the empathy with the enslaved African American he would express so regularly as an adult when

he was growing up.

When Mifflin was about fourteen, he was in the field when one of the young men enslaved and "raised in the family" asked him, as Mifflin related, "Whether I thought it could be right, that they should be toiling to raise me, and I sent to school, and by and by their children must do so for mine also?" Mifflin described his initial reaction to this questioning as "some little irritation." But it was an irritation which would yield a pearl, for he found that the reasoning of the young African American so impressed him "as never to be erased." Before he arrived at manhood, Mifflin determined that he would never be a slave holder.

Despite this early plan, after moving to Kent County, Delaware around the time of his marriage in 1767, Mifflin became a slave holder more by circumstance than design. Because he had not actively purchased slaves, but had received them through marriage, inheritance, and the movement of enslaved individuals who preferred to work for him in Delaware rather than stay in Virginia working for his father, Mifflin found ways to self justify his remaining a slave holder despite both his personal conviction and the rising pressure from the Society of Friends, which rejected slave holding on a religious and moral basis.

In 1774 as war with Great Britain appeared imminent, Mifflin's conflict of soul as a slave holder was intensified by a series of illnesses giving him pause to seriously reflect on his spiritual condition. "After some time debating, resolving and re-resolving," he experienced a dramatic conversion like Saul on the road to Damascus. While

*continued on page 2*

### In this issue:

- ◆ Warner Mifflin: A Founding Father of Abolition n  
by Michael R. McDowell – Page 1
- ◆ Jehu Hollingsworth: Prisoner of Conscience Amidst the  
American Revolution by Kim Burdick, MA, MPA – Page 5
- ◆ Upcoming Events – Page 7

## Warner Mifflin

*continued from page 1*

traveling in the midst of a violent thunder storm, where every flash seemed as though it might dispatch him, he realized that he was not ready to meet his maker while still a slave holder. In October of 1774 and January of 1775, Mifflin wrote deeds of manumission for a combined total of as many as 27 individuals he held in slavery.

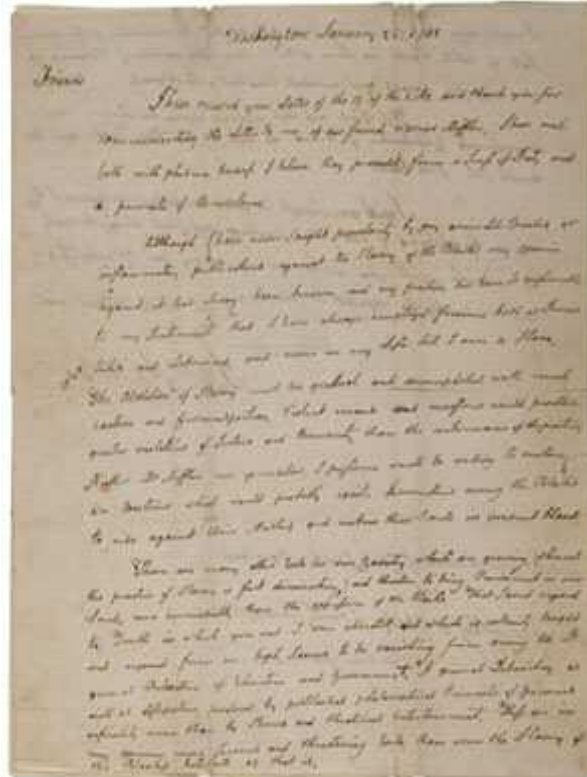
Freeing the people he held in bondage brought Mifflin the peace of mind he sought, but he did not rest contented that he had done all that he regarded as his duty to assist the oppressed African Americans. Having been a justice of the peace prior to the American Revolution, Mifflin brought legal knowledge and confidence to his subsequent efforts for justice for enslaved and free African Americans. His early efforts to promote the anti-slavery testimony of the Society of Friends involved meeting with Friends who were still slave holders and serving as recorder for the Book of Deeds of Manumission kept by his monthly meeting, as well as holding meetings with recently freed African Americans to provide support and see how they were faring.

By the 1780's, his mission expanded to efforts directed to changing state laws and convincing those outside of the Society of Friends to liberate the enslaved. Among the various legislative initiatives Mifflin pursued were the abolition of the slave trade, the abolition of slavery, laws to facilitate manumissions, and laws against the kidnapping of free blacks. Also, during this decade his letters begin to mention visits to his home, about a mile and a half south of present day Camden, Delaware, by blacks seeking assistance. The frequency of these visits would increase for the rest of his life. Mifflin's background as a former Justice of the Peace undoubtedly made him an effective advocate for blacks in freedom suits in which he served as "next friend" or advisor.

As a result of the efforts of Mifflin and other Friends, as well as the Methodists and the small Quaker-like sect of Nicholites, 74% of Kent County's African American population was free by 1800. This number exceeded the percentage of free blacks in New Castle county, and greatly exceeded

Sussex County's. Also, the census of 1790 revealed Delaware to have the greatest percentage of free blacks of any state, 6.6% of its total population.

In 1782 Mifflin and Philadelphia Quaker John Parrish travelled to Blackwater, Virginia, to attend Virginia Yearly Meeting. Following the meeting, they decided "to move in the line of divine appointment" and join a committee of Virginia Friends who presented an anti-



Mifflin's words were read far and wide during his lifetime and after, even reaching President John Adams. Mifflin himself wrote to Adams scarcely a month before his death, and at right is the first page of Adams' reply two years later to two abolitionists who had sent him an anti-slavery pamphlet by Mifflin, which the president says he read "with pleasure." Adams expressed sympathy with their views and wished them "success in your benevolent Endeavors," but firmly believed abolition must be done gradually and "with much caution and Circumspection," which was at odds with the view of ardent abolitionists.

*[John Adams to George Churchman and Jacob Lindley, January 24, 1801 — Collection of Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History]*

slavery petition to the Virginia assembly in Richmond and lobbied for a law permitting voluntary manumissions. The success of their 19-day lobbying effort initiated Mifflin into an anti-slavery lobbying role he would continue in for the remainder of his life, in both committee and individual efforts. The following year, he joined a committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) formed to petition and lobby the Continental Congress to stop the resumption of the slave trade following the Revolutionary War. To the Friends' great regret, this effort proved unsuccessful.

In December of 1785, the PYM Meeting for Sufferings communicated to Wilmington and Duck Creek, the two monthly meetings in Delaware at the time, a concern for the Africans and their descendants in the government of that state, observing that: "nothing had ever been done by them in laying before the men in power the grievances of this long injured people." Committees were formed at each monthly meeting; however,

the Wilmington committee soon learned that Duck Creek had already sent a petition to the Meeting for Sufferings in Philadelphia for approval. Mifflin, who served on the Duck Creek committee, likely took a leading role in composing the petition. One biographer claims that Mifflin was the author of the petition. The petition was presented by members of both Wilmington and Duck Creek monthly meetings on January 9, 1786, and was one of the first anti-slavery petitions to be presented to the Delaware General Assembly. Although a bill was sent to the house in 1786, it was deferred for further consideration.

The Quaker petition of 1785 helped lay the groundwork for another bill, which passed in 1787 after almost four weeks of lobbying by Mifflin. This is considered one of the most significant pieces of anti-slavery legislation to pass in Delaware during Mifflin's life time. The law prohibited the exportation of slaves unless approved by three justices, and barred the importation of slaves into the state. It also did away with a 60£ security requirement for manumissions of any healthy enslaved person between 18 and 35 years of age. The new law helped prevent the breakup of families, and greatly facilitated the rising pace of voluntary manumissions in Delaware.

In 1788 Mifflin cofounded one of the two original abolition societies organized in Delaware that year on the model of the recently reorganized Pennsylvania Abolition Society. One of the societies was based in Wilmington with officers who were predominantly Quaker men, and the other was based in Dover with a greater representation of non-Quakers in its leadership. Mifflin was also elected to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society on January 5, 1789, and was listed as the President of the Delaware Society (the Dover based society) at that time.

On February 11, 1790 Mifflin played a leading role in presenting, with other Friends, a PYM petition against the slave trade to the first Federal Congress. At the same time, a similar petition was presented from New York Yearly Meeting. Representatives from the Deep South were incensed by the petitions, believing the question

had been settled by the Constitutional Convention until at least 1808. The next day, a third petition from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was presented, signed by its President Benjamin Franklin. This petition went further, calling for the outright abolition of slavery citing the Constitution's general welfare clause. The endorsement of Franklin likely made certain the serious consideration of the petitions. Eventually the three petitions were referred to a select committee of seven, all southern delegations except Virginia having refused to cooperate with a proposed "grand committee."

When the report of the committee was presented the ensuing fierce debates contained, as historian



Warner Mifflin was a member of Motherkill Meeting, which was part of Duck Creek Monthly Meeting in Kent County, Delaware. Motherkill or Murderkill was a name for the area given by the early settlers in the region. Kil or kiln is Dutch for creek. The Motherkill Meeting was disbanded during the orthodox-Hicksite division, and its membership was absorbed by Camden Monthly Meeting. Mifflin was originally buried in the burial ground at Motherkill Meeting, but his remains and grave stone now reside at Camden Monthly Meeting Burial Ground. The Motherkill property was later sold. Though the burial ground remains intact some graves were moved to Camden Meeting. [photo Camden Friends Meeting]g. <http://friendsmedia.org/sqm/camden/>

Joseph Ellis notes, "virtually every argument that southern defenders of slavery would mount during the next seventy years." When the final committee as a whole report was passed it essentially closed the door on the congressional debate of slavery as it existed in the South. Furthermore, the slave trade still could not be prohibited until 1808, only allowing for some regulation of the trade.

In 1792 Mifflin presented a memorial of his own to the President, Senate and House of Representatives of the United States. In it, after reminding them of the solemn covenant of the Declaration of Independence and the words of the prophet Ezekiel, he challenged them to imagine their feelings if their wives, children, or near relatives were subjected to the separations, violence and brutality of slavery and the slave trade. South

## Warner Mifflin

*continued from page 3*

Carolina representative William Loughton Smith declared "the Paper in question is a mere rant and rhapsody of a meddling fanatic, interlarded with texts of Scripture, and concluded with no specific prayer." The House agreed to return the petition; however a motion to have entry of the petition expunged from the Journal was rejected.

In response to the harsh rejection of his 1792 memorial, Mifflin, wrote *A Serious Expostulation with the Members of the House of Representatives of the United States*, a pamphlet delivering a stirring indictment of nation's involvement in the slave trade. In it he answered charges of fanaticism: "if this is fanaticism, enthusiasm, & c. may the Almighty grant a double portion to what I ever experienced..."

Several state abolition societies gathered in Philadelphia in 1794 for the first convention of American abolition societies. Their objective was to collaborate in the preparation of memorials to the U.S. Congress and the various state legislatures, and to address to the citizens of the United States. Mifflin, who was serving as a delegate of the Delaware Society, was appointed to the committee that prepared an address to the Citizens of the United States, along with Benjamin Rush and Isaac H. Starr. The memorial presented to Congress following this convention helped bring about the passage of An Act to Prohibit the Carrying on of the Slave-Trade from the United States to Any Foreign Place or Country. The Slave Trade Act of 1794 was the first significant Federal law to limit any aspect of the slave trade.

Mifflin's efforts were noted outside the US. In Europe, especially in France, Mifflin became the personification of the idealized "Good Quaker." Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's French edition of *Letters of an American Farmer* presented a romanticized, fictionalized version of Mifflin's life. Jacques-Pierre Brissot met Mifflin in 1788, and in his book *New Travels in the United States* he exclaimed of Mifflin "What humanity! What charity! It seems his only pleasure, his very existence, is to love and serve mankind." Brissot helped found France's first abolition society, and was a leader in the beginnings of the French Revolution. In England abolitionist Thomas Clarkson wrote of Mifflin's leadership in manumissions, and in Germany under the name Walter Mifflin he became the hero of a play by August von Kotzebue called *The Quaker*.

Mifflin had detractors, too. Fears generated by the revolution of the enslaved in what is now Haiti, and the violence of the French Revolution created

a backlash against abolitionism and republicanism. Slave holders in Maryland clamored against him, claiming he gave passes to slaves and enticed them to escape to work for him for cheap, though Mifflin denied such charges. One Maryland critic wrote that Mifflin should be prohibited from coming into Maryland under pain of being tarred and feathered and conducted to the border of his own state by the sheriff.

In 1796 Mifflin gave a more extensive answer to his critics with his pamphlet *The Defense of Warner Mifflin Against Aspersions cast on him on Account of his endeavours to promote Righteousness, Mercy and Peace, among Mankind*. In his *Defense*, Mifflin provided a good deal of autobiographical material to explain his actions, and to show skeptics that if he could liberate the people he held in bondage so could others. With over twenty years of experience and thought on the subject, he provided answers to some of common objections he had heard against freeing the enslaved.

Warner Mifflin died October 16, 1798. It is said he died after contracting yellow fever while ministering to the victims of the epidemic in Philadelphia when in the city to attend Yearly Meeting. He was borne to his grave in the Motherkilm (Murderkill) Meeting burial grounds by African Americans, prefiguring a similar act of regard and affection by the African American community following the death of the noted station master of the Underground Railroad, Thomas Garrett in Wilmington seventy three years later.

The poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier would call Warner Mifflin "one of the truest and noblest men of any age or country." However, of the many tributes and eulogies given to the memory of Mifflin and his service to the cause of humanity perhaps the most moving and meaningful is that of Richard Allen of Philadelphia, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church who had formerly been enslaved in Kent County, Delaware. In the year following Mifflin's death Allen wrote, "We cannot but regret the loss of that great and good man Warner Mifflin, ... whose labours and anxiety were great for the freedom of our race; who for many years devoted his time to that service, and who has been instrumental in the hands of God, in liberating hundreds, if not thousands of the African race...We hope that every slave he has been instrumental in freeing, is a star in his garment, and that he will shine unto the perfect day."

*Michael R. McDowell is a local historian, and is currently working on a book about Warner Mifflin.*



# Jehu Hollingsworth: Prisoner of Conscience Amidst the American Revolution

by Kim Burdick, MA, MPA

Jehu Hollingsworth was born on 27 Oct 1731. He was the son of Enoch Hollingsworth and Joanna Crowley, and was descended from the prominent early Brandywine Hundred Quaker, Valentine Hollingsworth.

Enoch Hollingsworth's 1752 will states: "To son Jehu my plantation in Kennett, he paying to my daughter Abigail, wife of William Harlan, Jr. £25.

"Executor: Brother in law John Chads. Wit: Elianor Pyle, Hannah Thatcher, and Thomas Harlan."

On May 20 of that same year Jehu married Ann Pyle by whom he had two children, Samuel Pyle Hollingsworth B: Abt 1753 and Jehu Pyle Hollingsworth b: abt 1754. After Ann Pyles's death in 1779, Jehu married Deborah Phillips, who died 9 Apr 1793.

Hollingsworth's name appears in Kennett records in 1752, then again in the early 1760s as a landowner along the Brandywine Creek in Wilmington, Delaware on "a lot of land situate on S side of Brandywine Creek in SD Borough."

Except in land records, there is little mention of Jehu Hollingsworth during the next decade.

In July, 1777 things changed. Word filtered upstream that Henry Fisher, a Delaware River pilot and David Hall, Commander of the Delaware Continental Regiment, had spotted 228 British war ships off Cape Henlopen. Philadelphia, the rebel capital, was their goal. Unpredictably, the British fleet changed its course and on the morning of July 2 headed for the Chesapeake Bay.

Uncertainty caused tension. Delaware merchants began sending their goods to Chester County for safekeeping. Many local residents fled northwestward, seeking refuge in the Lancaster area. For

weeks scores of families formed a baggage train stretching along the Reading Road for miles. Jehu Hollingsworth was among them, in spite of Quaker admonitions for Friends to stay put.



(ABOVE) In July of 1777, more than 200 British warships appeared off Cape Henlopen on their way to the colonial capitol of Philadelphia, filling area residents with apprehension and foreboding. The sight would have appeared something like the above painting by Dominic Serres (1719-1793), which depicts a similar British Naval invasion of Penobscot Bay in 1779. *National Maritime Museum, London*

(LEFT) Commanding the fearsome armada was British General Sir William Howe. His decision to land from the Chesapeake and avoid the well-defended Delaware River cost him nearly a month due to foul weather, but his strategy confused Washington and the British triumphed at Chadds Ford. Gen. Howe commanded the British troops that occupied Wilmington in Sept.-Oct., 1777.

Tired, hungry and discouraged, people gathered at The White Swan, the Grape, and other taverns for food and lodging. In a short time every vacant room in the borough was taken and people went to outlying farms. Those who could not find beds camped on the Commons. Lancaster natives faced with the potential dangers an ever-growing number of refugees might represent were over-

*continued on page 6*

## Jehu Hollingsworth

*continued from page 5*

whelmed and frightened.

On September 3 as the sounds of the Battle of Cooch's Bridge echoed across the fields that afternoon, Delawareans received a frightening message from Philadelphia. "The Gentlemen of the Board of War" had put out a warrant for the arrest of thirty-six men. Twenty well-respected Philadelphia Friends suspected of Loyalist leanings had been imprisoned without a hearing. "The City of Brotherly Love" was no longer a safe haven for Quakers. These Philadelphia men were subsequently exiled to Winchester, Virginia, where they remained until April 1778.

On September 12, the British having been victorious at Chadds Ford, entered Wilmington, occupying the City until the middle of October.

The Wilmington Friends discovered that Jehu Hollingsworth had been imprisoned in the Lancaster jail on September 18 for refusing to comply with the Test Act, which required swearing an oath to the patriot cause.

Allegiance was not the issue, oaths were the issue. Oath taking involves swearing to the truthfulness of one's words and intentions, which implies that one might not be truthful unless taking an oath. When they refused to sign the required oaths of allegiance to the United States, pacifists were fined, imprisoned, and condemned as Loyalists and traitors.

Like other Quakers, his faith and the Scriptures had taught Jehu Hollingsworth to "swear not at all." Instead he insisted that his word—an affirmation—was sufficient. \*

9/27/1777. Wilmington Friends Meeting. Eleven friends met being all the committee except Daniel Byrnes. The Friends appointed to write to Jehu Hollingsworth having wrote a letter but had

no opportunity of sending it to him, have now produced it here and it was read and approved. They are desired to sign it and forward it by the first convenient opportunity, a copy thereof here follows... [Swarthmore]

The Continental Congress fled Philadelphia for Lancaster on September 25 and tension mounted. Less than a month later, the British occupying forces headed to Philadelphia, leaving a traumatized New Castle County behind them.

11/17/1777. Ten Friends met. A letter being received by the friends who wrote to him and a



Loyalists who favored the King over revolution were subject to all manner of mistreatment, from tarring and feathering to confiscation of property, imprisonment and even death, and great numbers went into permanent exile in Canada. But Quakers like Jehu Hollingsworth, who refused to swear an oath of loyalty for purely religious reasons, and even offering to solemnly affirm their loyalty in place of swearing an oath, were treated the same as loyalists, and endured similar treatment regardless of their sympathies.

copy of the mittimus enclosed therein. After consideration of Jehu Hollingsworth's ease, William Marshall, Daniel Byrnes and David Ferris are appointed to attend the next monthly meeting of Sadsbury and consult about doing something for his help and release, and proceed as truth may point out; either in visiting Jehu or otherwise. [Swarthmore]

From December until May, 1778 although Wilmington was occupied by Maryland and Delaware troops of the Continental Army under General Smallwood the

Quakers and other residents of Wilmington tried to calmly go about their business. Throughout that long winter, Daniel Byrnes and his committee traveled on behalf of

the Friends, back and forth from White Clay to Wilmington to Lancaster and beyond, crossing and recrossing lines, mindful that they could be blamed for being spies.

01/01/ 1778, Daniel Byrnes reported to Committee for Sufferings that the Committee had attended Sadsbury Monthly Meeting and had discovered from them that although Jehu Hollingsworth appeared to be OK that there was no probability of his being released from Lancaster Jail. Informed that the Western Quarterly Meeting in cases of Suffering was to meet next Second Day, Byrnes, William Marshall and Robert Johnson were

\* Today, many jurisdictions, including Pennsylvania and Delaware, do accept affirmation as an equal alternative to swearing an oath for all legal purposes.

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**Upcoming Quaker Hill Events**

**Three Underground Railroad Workshops for Children**

The Quaker Hill Historic Preservation Foundation offers three, free Underground Railroad workshops for children at 10:00 a.m. on certain Saturdays in January and February, 2014 at the Wilmington Friends Meeting at 401 N. West Street, Wilm., DE.

The first workshop, presented by Patricia Lewis and Mia Muratori on January 5, 2014, features a story about Thomas Garrett, stationmaster on the Underground Railroad; art about the Underground Railroad; and refreshments.

The second workshop, presented by Darleen Amobi on February 2, 2014, will feature the story of Henry Box Brown, both read aloud and on video; a re-enactment by Willis Phelps of the life and times of a Civil War veteran; a visit to the grave of Thomas Garrett; and refreshments.

The third workshop, presented by Darlene Bonney on Feb. 23, 2014, will feature a story about Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin; the film *Up From Slavery*; and refreshments. *The programs are free and open to the public. For more information, call Mary Starkweather-White at (302) 299-5600.*

**Recent Event: QHNA/QHHPF Picnic June 5, 2013**

A wonderful picnic with about 40 participants was held by the Quaker Hill Neighborhood Association in conjunction with the Quaker Hill Historic Preservation Foundation on the grounds of Wilmington Friends Meeting on June 5, 2013! Two distinguished Quaker Hill residents past and present, Former Mayor Jim Baker and Sean Reilly, were presented with the Thomas Garrett Award Humanitarian Award for service to Quaker Hill. While we enjoyed the festivities, Professional Singer Sean Reilly graced the event by singing Frank Sinatra songs! The whole wonderful event was televised!

**In Memoriam: Carolyn Mendenhall (Lynch)**

QHHPF is sorry to announce the death of Carolyn E. Mendenhall (Lynch) on April 30, 2013. Carolyn was a staff guide at Winterthur Museum for over 50 years and a descendent of Rachel Mendenhall Garrett, beloved wife of Underground Railroad Stationmaster Thomas Garrett. Carolyn will be sorely missed by all who knew her.

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**Quaker Hill Historic Preservation Foundation**  
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## Jehu Hollingsworth

*continued from page 6*

appointed to travel there in the expectation they might hear more about Jehu Hollingsworth. [Swarthmore]

02/26/1778. The Wilmington Monthly Meeting decided unanimously that the Friends ought to be careful not to contribute any means to the support of the present commotion and confusions either by paying taxes or otherwise. [Swarthmore]

Henry Drinker Collection at Haverford shows that on "4 mo. 3, 1778 to 4 mo. 22, 1778 Elizabeth Drinker, wife of one of the Philadelphia Quakers imprisoned in Winchester, Virginia went with Susanna Jones, Mary Pleasants, and Phebe Pemberton to Lancaster. She reported they talked to the President and Council of Pa. and that their husbands were to be brought to Lancaster area and released. Those men arrived in Lancaster on April 24. It appears that Jehu Hollingsworth was not yet released from the Lancaster jail.

On July 1, 1778 a test oath of all white males in Delaware went into effect with property being seized from those who did not favor independence. For Jehu Hollingsworth, finally released from Lancaster jail for refusing to swear this same oath

in Pennsylvania, this must have been sickening news.

Economic conditions worsened before they improved. Hard times in the lower Delaware Valley lasted through 1779. Farmers, millers and merchants faced limited international trade, harvest failure, labor shortages, depreciated currency and inflated prices.

One way to increase revenue was to put more pressure on the passive resisters. The Book of Sufferings shows increased activity. In March, 1780 Jehu Hollingsworth's name once more appears: "From Jehu Hollingsworth demanded 100 pounds for war and other taxes: leather worth 2.8.0, and by Robert Stewart collector in York County demand 117 pounds for war tax, two cows." [Swarthmore]

By 1784, the War was over and most of the soldiers were home. Jehu Hollingsworth faded from the scene. He died in 1819 and is buried in Friends Burial Ground at Old Kennett.

*Kimberly Burdick, MA, MPA, is Curator of the Hale-Byrnes House in Newark, Del. If anyone has additional information Kim would be glad to hear from you. Please e-mail her at [halebyrneshouse@aol.com](mailto:halebyrneshouse@aol.com).*



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#### In this issue:

- ◆ Warner Mifflin: A Founding Father of Abolition n  
by *Michael R. McDowell* – Page 1
- ◆ Jehu Hollingsworth: Prisoner of Conscience Amidst the  
American Revolution by *Kim Burdick, MA, MPA* – Page 5
- ◆ Upcoming Events – Page 7