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Al Southwick: Worcester's Quaker era

A talk I gave the other day at Preservation Worcester's annual meeting on my grandfather, Stephen C. Earle, led to reflections on a remarkable episode in Worcester history - when Quakers were a key part of the city establishment.

Stephen Earle (1839-1913), a prominent Worcester architect a century ago, was one of the Worcester notables whose roots were in a tiny Quaker colony in Leicester. In 1732, shortly after the town was organized, a number of residents petitioned the Leicester selectmen for permission to organize their own Quaker meeting and be exempted from the state tax that supported the established Calvinist church. Surprisingly, the petition was granted and the little group worshiped on Sundays in a small wooden building for more than a century.

Stephen Earle was born in 1839 and spent his early years in the small village later known as Mannville. When his father, Amos Earle, died in 1853, his widow with five children decided to move to Worcester, where a cousin, Edward Earle, was a rising figure both in politics and industry. The Quaker invasion had begun. After the Worcester Quakers organized a meeting in Worcester, the Leicester Quakers gradually faded away. The little meeting house held its last meeting in or about 1850.

Quakers had arrived in Salem, Massachusetts in the 1630s, and had been brutally persecuted for their unorthodox beliefs. They held that individuals could commune directly with God without the need of clergy. The Puritan government, already rattled by dissenters Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson, reacted fiercely. My niece, Rebecca Southwick, has written an account of the travails of those early Quakers, including Lawrence and Cassandra Southwick, our forbears. She describes in graphic terms, the jailings, the beatings, the fines, the ear croppings (cutting off ears with a blade), and the humiliations inflicted on the Quakers. One of our ancestors, Provided Southwick, was put up at auction to be sold into slavery in Barbados, but no sea captain willing to carry out the order could be found. The persecution of the Quakers was ended in 1661 by decree of King Charles II.

Two centuries later, the Quakers had long since become respected members of various Massachusetts communities, including the Uxbridge-Mendon area. The Leicester Quakers were an offshoot of that group.

The Leicester meeting, small as it was, was destined to play an outsized role in the development of Worcester. That was due primarily because of one family - the Earles. Stephen Earle was 14 when his mother arrived in Worcester with her five children in 1853, moving into the home of his father's cousin, Edward Earle, already one of the community's movers and shakers. He was a prominent industrialist who became a city councilor and also served as mayor. His wife, Ann B. Earle, would be elected to the Worcester School Committee in 1868, years before women could vote.

Another key figure, and cousin, was John Milton Earle, owner and editor of the two most important newspapers in the city, the weekly Massachusetts Spy and the Worcester Daily Spy. He was also a state representative and was instrumental in getting a city charter for Worcester in 1848. Years later, after his retirement, he was asked by the Massachusetts governor to draw up a report on the condition of the native Indian tribes in the state as the basis of legislation regarding Indian affairs.

Also prominent was Timothy Earle, another cousin. He owned and ran the big T.K. Earle Company on Grafton Street, reputedly the largest manufacturer of card clothing in the land at that time. Card clothing – the wire brushes used to comb flax and wool into spinnable yarn – had been developed in Leicester by Pliny Earle and his brothers. For a few years, Leicester was the main manufacturer of these wire brushes in the land.

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The Earle family had other notable figures. Dr. Pliny Earle II was a pioneer in the treatment of mental health. He was one of the founders of the American Medical Association and long-term superintendent of the State Lunatic Asylum in Northampton.

Another cousin, who had moved to Philadelphia, was Thomas Earle, prominent politician and dedicated Abolitionist who was the vice presidential nominee of the Liberty Party in 1840.

My grandfather, Stephen Earle, who would leave his mark on Worcester as an architect, studied at M.I.T. and with Calvert Vaux in New York. Among many other structures, Stephen Earle designed Bancroft Tower, the original Worcester Art Museum, Chestnut Street Congregational Church, G.A.R. Hall at the Bull mansion, libraries in Leicester, Holden and Princeton, Clark Hall at Clark University, Boynton Hall at W.P.I. and any number of schoolhouses, residences and churches across Worcester County and beyond.

His son, Rear Admiral Ralph Earle, after notable Navy service in World War I, was president of W.P.I. from 1925 to 1938.

The remarkable Earle clan in 19th Century Worcester had a humble beginning – the tiny Quaker community in Leicester. No one would have guessed in 1840 what was in store for Stephen Earle and all his cousins.

- Albert B. Southwick's columns appear regularly in the Telegram & Gazette.