

CHESTNUT HILL FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE  
100 E. Mermaid Lane  
Philadelphia  
Philadelphia County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6688

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PA-6688

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
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1849 C St. NW  
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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### CHESTNUT HILL FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

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Location: 100 E. Mermaid Lane, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19118

Significance: The design of Chestnut Hill Meeting House was innovative in ways that reflected changes in Quaker faith and practice indicative of the modern era in Friends' history. The meeting house was built in 1931 in a form that resembles the "rancher-style" of residential architecture. As such, the design of Chestnut Hill suggests a connection between meeting houses and contemporary domestic forms. Considering that Friends' meetings generally were initiated within the homes of its members, this seems appropriate. More importantly, Chestnut Hill was likely the first meeting house in the Delaware Valley to be built without a facing bench. The focus traditionally provided by the "facing benches" from which the ministers, elders, and overseers presided over the meeting for worship is substituted by a fireplace hearth. The removal of the facing benches mirrors the diminishing role of these individuals and of the hierarchical relationship among members. Likewise, the removal of the retractable wood partition traditionally used to separate men and women during their business meetings is reflective of the modern practice of holding a joint business meeting. Chestnut Hill's plan is also expressive of the trend towards providing for a multi-purpose facility. The meeting house plan combines many meeting functions under one roof through the inclusion of space for social activities, child care, kitchen, and restroom facilities. In addition, the Chestnut Hill Meeting House is historically significant as the first meeting to be formed as a "United Meeting" following the schism that divided Friends into Orthodox and Hicksite factions in 1827. Official recognition by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting for their united meeting status came in 1933.

Description: The Chestnut Hill Meeting House is a single-story structure with a low-pitched gable roof built in a sprawling rancher-type configuration. It has a facade of rubble stone over concrete block and a stuccoed foundation. There is a central gable-front pavilion in which the main entry is located. The entry sits to the east end of the pavilion and is covered by gable-fronted portico. At the western end there is a projecting gable-fronted ell. The windows in the main block are six-over-six-light sash, with paneled shutters. There are eight-over-twelve-light windows in the front-facing facade of the western ell, and three-part casements along its west side elevation. The structural system is of load-bearing rough-cast concrete block.

The interior plan consists of a meeting room in east end with an adjoining space, a central entry vestibule, kitchen and restroom facilities in the west end with classrooms to the rear. In the meeting room, the benches face inward and are centered around a fireplace located against the rear wall. There are folding doors along the west wall that can be opened up to expand the capacity of the room during special events. The property includes school facilities originally intended for a First-day school and now used as a day care facility.

History: Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, suburban development in the outlying areas around the city of Philadelphia caused a shift in the Quaker

CHESTNUT HILL FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE  
HAS NO. PA- 6688 (page 2)

population. The changing demographics resulted in the need for the construction of new meeting houses. Among these expanding areas was the Chestnut Hill neighborhood. On November 9, 1924, sixteen individuals met at the home of D. Robert and Elizabeth Yarnall to discuss the formation of a new meeting.<sup>1</sup> That year, an indulged meeting was established under the care of both the Abington (Orthodox) and Philadelphia (Hicksite) quarterly meetings. The Friends of Chestnut Hill met at various homes and other locations, including an office building owned by Yarnall-Waring Company at 102 Mermaid Lane, until the current structure could be erected. This arrangement was likely made possible through the influence of Yarnall, who was a senior member of the company.<sup>2</sup> The office provided a central location for the meetings, but it was too impersonal a setting when compared to those offered by individual's homes. Perhaps because of the shift in venue the desire for a more intimate design for their meeting house was first aroused. The decidedly domestic, ranch-house form that the Friends selected is an interesting variation on the theme of meeting house design as derived from domestic architecture, or how meeting in dwelling houses initially could then have resulted in the adaptation of residential forms as models.

The innovative design for Chestnut Hill Meeting House reflected changing patterns of Quaker thought and practice indicative of the modern era in Friends' history. Recovering from the various schisms that occurred within the Society of Friends beginning in 1827-28 with the division into Hicksite and Orthodox factions, many of the traditional meeting practices were eliminated, and Friends in general became more attuned to mainstream culture. Chestnut Hill Meeting House is significant in its adoption of these new patterns. It was the first meeting house within the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) to be built without a facing bench, and among the first erected without a partition.<sup>3</sup> The focal point of the meeting originally supplied by the facing benches is replaced by a fireplace hearth. Likewise, the division of the meeting house into

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<sup>1</sup> Martha J. Robinson, "Chestnut Hill Monthly Meeting of Friends; the Founding Years 1924-1931" (unpublished paper, provided to this author, October 10, 2000). The sixteen original members were Vincent D. and Rebecca Carter Nicholson; James A. and Marion S. Norton; Harold S. and Mary C. Webster; Edward Morris and Esther Holmes Jones; E. Laurie and Edna P. Mifflin; Howard W. and Katherine W. Elkinton; Manning J. and Georgia Smith; and Robert D. and Elizabeth B. Yarnall.

<sup>2</sup> T. Chalkley Matlack, "Brief Historical Sketches concerning Friends' Meetings of the Past and Present with special reference to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting," Book 1, pgs. 7-13 (the original volumes are located at The Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library; copy available at FHL), 465. According to this account, the company produced "Yar-way Plant Power Devices."

<sup>3</sup> West Grove Friends Meeting House was built without a partition in 1903. Although the construction of a partition was discussed, debate over the issue served to delay the decision-making process until such traditional elements and the practices that they reflected were deemed obsolete.

CHESTNUT HILL FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE  
HAS NO. PA- 6688 (page 3)

discrete apartments for separate men's and women's business meeting, as had been the tradition, was no longer necessary once meetings such as Chestnut Hill began to hold joint sessions.<sup>4</sup>

Precedent for the innovations found in the Chestnut Hill Meeting House came from the office space provided by the Yarnall-Waring Company. Filing cabinets and office equipment were pushed back and chairs were arranged in a semi-circle during the meetings for worship. Because of the setting, traditional features of Friends' meeting houses such as the facing benches were missing from the meetings; this lack reportedly was discomforting to some visitors to their meetings. Instead of the facing benches, the room contained a fireplace around which the chairs were arranged, a feature that was prominently used later in the design of the meeting house. Without the direct oversight of the ministers, elders, and overseers who once occupied the facing benches, the members of the newly formed Chestnut Hill Meeting, many of whom were struggling to support young families, found strength in their reliance upon each other.<sup>5</sup> As the minutes from a January 1926 meeting attest:

Some of our Meeting for Worship during this year and a half have fallen short of our ideal, some have risen, we feel, to genuine heights of spiritual experience. Together we have sought and sometimes found; always we have felt growing fellowship. We think, on hearing the second, Third, and Fourth Queries, there we might truly answer, 'Our love for one another is indeed sincere and joyful.' We have come nearer to the sense of God's reality and presence for the realization of which our meeting exists.

The Chestnut Hill Meeting House became a focus of the social as well as the spiritual activities of its members. Sunday evening "Tea Meetings" attracted guest speakers such as A. Neave Brayshawe, from England; Seal Thompson, from Wellesley, the Rabbi Fineshriber, Alexander Purdy, and others. And in 1927, a "First-day" or Sunday school was established for the members' children.

Planning for the meeting house began in the spring of 1927, and over the next couple of years various sites were considered. Finally, on April 9, 1929, the Property Committee for the meeting was able to report that Yarnall-Waring Company had agreed to the lease of an adjoining 125' x 70' parcel of land. With that issue resolved, the meeting began to organize for the financial support needed to construct a meeting house. In addition to the funds raised by members and other supporting individuals, the meeting was able to procure a loan from the Arch Street

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<sup>4</sup>Although separate business meetings were not formally eliminated altogether until 1923, many meetings had begun to voluntarily do away with them beginning in the late nineteenth century. Arney's Mount Meeting in southern New Jersey was the earliest recorded incident of the elimination of separate men's and women's meetings that this author has found. Chestnut Hill was among the first to build a meeting house conducive to this arrangement.

<sup>5</sup> Martha J. Robinson, "Chestnut Hill Monthly Meeting of Friends."

CHESTNUT HILL FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE  
HAS NO. PA- 6688 (page 4)

Meeting. By spring of 1930, the Friends were ready to proceed with construction. D. Robert Yarnall, G. Lupton Broomell, and Howard W. Elkinton were appointed as trustees authorized with securing the property and overseeing the construction of the meeting house. As indicative of Quaker practice with regard to meeting house construction, meeting members played a role in developing a plan and seeing to the construction of the meeting house. Treasurer and member of the Property Committee Henry Dearden devised the original plan, which was refined by Joseph Linden Heacock, who is the architect of record for the meeting house. Heacock graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in architecture in 1895. He apprenticed with the firm of Hales & Ballinger upon graduation, but opened his own firm a year later, partnering with classmate Oscar M. Hokanson in 1899. Although Heacock undertook residential design, he specialized in the design of schools, and was on the board of the Friends Central School System. In addition to Chestnut Hill, Heacock developed the design for the Yardley and West Grove (Hicksite) meeting houses, and alterations and/or additions to the meeting houses at Girard Avenue (no longer extant), Greene Street, Swarthmore College, and Frankford (Preparative).<sup>6</sup> The building was erected by contractor Melvin Grebe.

The first meeting in the new meeting house was held on September 13, 1931. With its construction came a flourish of new members. Although encouraging, some old members were concerned that too many in attendance might offset the balance created by a small and intimate group. After only a few weeks the minutes recorded, "After three Sundays in the new meeting house we are a bit stunned. Sixty there last week, of whom only a few were casual visitors. . . Must we, when we suddenly double in size, have a few people preaching, or can we continue to share out of the fulness of our lives?"<sup>7</sup> The meeting house proved sufficient for most meetings, although it was overcrowded during special events such as weddings, funerals, and organized suppers. While the room to the east of the entry hall was used for meetings for worship and business, the west room served the dual purpose of kitchen and kindergarten. Despite initial overcrowding, it was not until 1964 that an addition was made. The meeting room remained intact and the adjoining hall was taken over by the new "gathering room" that was separated by folding doors that enabled the meeting room to be expanded as needed. A modern kitchen and two small classrooms were created. The Chestnut Hill Meeting continues to enjoy a lively membership of over two-hundred.<sup>8</sup>

Chestnut Hill Meeting is also significant because it was the first "United Meeting" of Friends formed within the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting following the 1827 schism; the Chestnut Hill

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<sup>6</sup> Sandra L. Tatman & Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects, 1700-1930* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 356-62.

<sup>7</sup> Martha J. Robinson, "Chestnut Hill Monthly Meeting of Friends."

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

CHESTNUT HILL FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE  
HAS NO. PA- 6688 (page 5)

Friends did not recognize the distinction between the Hicksite and Orthodox factions.<sup>9</sup> The meeting originated in 1924 through a joint venture between Abington Orthodox and Philadelphia Hicksite quarterly meetings. Letters of indulgence were sent to the both the Orthodox and Hicksite meetings closest to Chestnut Hill, those of Germantown (the Orthodox Meeting at Coulter Street, and the Hicksite Meeting on School House Lane). A joint committee of oversight was formed by the two meetings. Finally, in 1933, they were recognized as a united meeting by the authority of the Abington Quarterly Meeting, under the care of yearly meeting at Arch Street. This occurred despite the fact that the Hicksite and Orthodox factions were not formally reunited until 1955. The interest in forming a united meeting is credited to the involvement by many of Chestnut Hill Meeting's founding members in the newly formed American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). The formation of the AFSC allowed Friends active participation in the efforts of the world wars without compromising Quaker tenets such as the peace testimony through involvement in civilian aid and post-war reconstruction projects. Participation in the AFSC came from both Hicksite and Orthodox camps and is therefore believed to have helped reunite the two yearly meetings.<sup>10</sup> In terms of its relevance to the formation of Chestnut Hill Meeting, its members originated from both the Hicksite Meeting at Race Street and the Orthodox Meeting at Arch Street.

Sources:

Matlack, T. Chalkley. "Brief Historical Sketches concerning Friends' Meetings of the Past and Present with special reference to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting," Book 1, pgs. 7-13 (the original volumes are located at The Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library; copy available at FHL).

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Yarnall, D. Robert & Elizabeth. "The Chestnut Hill Meeting," *The Friend*, vol. 105, no. 23, December 3, 1931, 265-66.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

CHESTNUT HILL FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE  
HAS NO. PA- 6688 (page 6)

Historian: Catherine C. Lavoie, 2001.

Project Information: The documentation of the Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting House was undertaken as part of a larger project to record the Friends Meetings Houses of the Delaware Valley. Funding was made possible through a congressional appropriation for documentation in Southeastern Pennsylvania and a grant from the William Penn Foundation. The project was planned and administered by HAS historians Aaron V. Wunsch and Catherine C. Lavoie; and architect Robert R. Arzola. Large Format Photography was undertaken by Jack E. Boucher, HAS photographer. Special thanks for their assistance in facilitating the documentation of Chestnut Hill Meeting House goes to Martha J. Robinson for her invaluable account of the formation of Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting.