

ELIZABETH HARRIS, PIONEER QUAKER.
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Sometime in 1655 or early 1656, Elizabeth Harris arrived in Annapolis (then called Providence), Maryland, the first Quaker missionary and probably the first Quaker in America. She antedated the arrival of Quakers in Massachusetts by a few months. In Massachusetts Friends Mary Fisher and Ann Austin appeared in mid 1656 and were promptly jailed before they could begin to upset the Puritan society. In Maryland, however, Mrs. Harris proved to be one of the most successful advocates for the Society of Friends in America.

Nothing is known about the early life of Elizabeth Harris except that in 1649 she married William Harris in England. Shortly afterwards she was "convinced" became a publisher of "Truth" and consequently received a commission from George Fox to go to New World as a missionary. Unlike other religious groups, Quakers never gave men the exclusive prerogatives of preaching or ministering to spiritual needs. The absence of distinctions based on sex made it possible for women missionaries to receive opportunities to preach publicly and to travel as extensively as men did. Women Quakers were encouraged to take an extraordinarily active in religious development. The records abound with references to women missionaries. Elizabeth Harris, for instance, was followed in Maryland by Jane Millard in 1662, Mary Tomkins in 1683 and Alice Ambrose in 1664, all of whom were travelling Quaker preachers on the Western Shore of Maryland. There were probably others whose names are now forgotten. Thus Elizabeth Harris was not unique except insofar as she was probably the first and is numbered among the most successful "convincers."

On her trip to America, unlike her Massachusetts counterparts, Mrs. Harris was left free to proselytize unmolested by the authorities in Maryland. True to the admonition of the Proprietor, Lord Baltimore, and in accordance with the 1649 Act of Toleration, the Quaker Mrs. Harris was permitted freedom of conscience and protected by law against any attempt to restrain "the free exercise thereof." Within the first year she had convinced several of the principal Puritan leaders, the politically prominent leaders, William Durand and Richard Preston, as well as the resident Governor, William Fuller.

Apparently she was more discreet and probably more personable than the male missionaries who immediately followed her. Friends Thomas Thurston and Josias Cole were jailed and then banished from the Colony in 1658, the ostensible justification not their preaching of an unorthodox religion but the political offense of refusing to take the required oath to the Proprietor. Since Quakers could not in good conscience swear an oath, the requirement appeared to a blow to their religious liberty. However, it may well be, as one authority suggests, that the fact of Quaker persecution may have depended upon the personality of the individual preacher, the restraint or antagonism of his manner as well as the hostility of particular officials at any one moment. Elizabeth Harris may not only have been more tactful but had a less hostile set of officials to contend with.

Mrs. Harris was not in the Maryland colony at that time of persecution for the other Quakers, but was making the first of several trips back to England. In 1660 she again was in Maryland and continued her missionary work unmolested. Sometimes before 1665, she returned to England. Between 1665 and 1672 it has been surmised she may have been in prison in England during which time William Harris died leaving his Maryland property to his widow. She next appeared in Lord Baltimore's colony in 1673 as the wife of Mr. Warner, but shortly afterwards was widowed a second time. After

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afterwards was widowed a second time. After that date she disappeared from the public record.

There has been some debate regarding who introduced Quakerism to America, and Elizabeth Harris has not yet been accepted as the progenitor. Nonetheless, evidence points in that direction. In 1656 English Quakers sent books to the New World destined for the Chesapeake Bay area, but they sent none to Massachusetts, indicating that "messengers of the Truth," or missionaries, were active in Maryland or Virginia. The consignment of books was for "Virginia," a term used for all the Chesapeake Bay area in the mid-seventeenth century. There is, however, no other indication of the presence of Quakers in the Virginia colony until Thomas Thurston and Josias Cole were jailed there in 1657. In addition, a letter by Robert Clarkson to Elizabeth Harris dated 1657--the most important account in existence of her missionary work--refers to a fairly substantial Quaker population in Maryland. According to that letter, the books were for the distribution around Herring Creek, Broad Creek, South River and the Severn, as well as for several other places on the Western Shore and Kent Island on the Eastern Shore. Elizabeth Harris' contemporaries assumed that she was most responsible for planting the seeds of Quaker belief in Maryland long before the arrival of books.

The arrests of Cole and Thurston and the persecution of their followers in Maryland may also be taken as evidence of Mrs. Harris' early success. The political leadership in Maryland became most disturbed not during the visit of a single Quaker, but only after Mrs. Harris had successfully won over a large part of the population. Thus only a widespread movement was a threat to the conventional means of social control during that century. Several Quakers were whipped for aiding Thurston, and others were fined for violating the requirement to bear arms or refusing to be jurors. Quaker influences were feared only partly on theological grounds; their practices seemed to undermine political and social stability especially when they refused military obligations and objected to taking oaths of allegiance to the Proprietor. Even in the tolerant religious atmosphere of 17th-century Maryland, a large Quaker population might well represent a threat to the established society. Thus repression as early as 1658 reflects a reaction to a well-developed, already established and possibly expanding group.

Since this change from tolerance to intolerance came about within a year of Elizabeth Harris' first appearance in Annapolis, it was probably an inadvertent result of her success as a "convincer." Unless further evidence is discovered to prove to the contrary, Elizabeth Harris can be considered the forebear of the American Religious Society of Friends as well as the first woman minister in America.

Brief Bibliography:

The works on Elizabeth Harris are very thin. Phoebe Jacobson's introduction to Quaker Records in Maryland (1966) is a useful supplement to the works by Kenneth Carroll: "Persecution of Quakers in Early Md," Quaker Hist. 53 (Aut. 1964), "Md. Quakers in 17th Century," Md. Hist. Mag. 47 (Dec. 1952) & Quakers on Eastern Shore (1970), Most useful is J. Reany Kelly, Quakers in the Founding of Anne Arundel Co., Md. (1963)