



Friends Meetinghouse



Photo by Artist-in-Residence Linda Szabo

Faith, Hope, and Charity

Herbert Hoover was influenced greatly by the Quaker belief in the equality of all people, regardless of race, gender, or creed. Hoover's remarkable relief efforts put that belief into practice. The restored Friends Meetinghouse, where Herbert and his family worshipped, represents the values of the community that shaped Herbert Hoover's early years in West Branch.

West Branch Meeting

The first Quaker settlers in West Branch met in members' homes. Quakers contributed to the construction of the first schoolhouse in 1853 and used it as their meetinghouse. By 1857 there were enough Quakers in town to build a separate meetinghouse on Downey Street, half a block north of Main Street.

The Meetinghouse was simply furnished and decorated. Until 1883, the West Branch Quakers held twice-weekly unprogrammed meetings for worship, with no trained minister, no planned pattern for service, and no music or singing.

Males and females sat on each side of an open partition, to encourage individual worship and full participation for women. The partitions were closed during the monthly meetings while membership business—marriages, deaths, births, new members, transfers, and disownment—was discussed.

Infants and young children sat with their mothers. When infants disturbed the silence of the meeting their mothers took them to the nursery, or "cry room", attached to the women's side of the Meetinghouse. On the coal burning stoves, women heated soap stones which they used to warm their feet in cold weather.

Worshippers sat in "silent waiting" and spoke only when moved by an inner spirit. With the emphasis on individual worship, the Meetinghouse had no pulpit or altar, no crucifixes or stained glass, nor an organ or a choir.

Members who spoke often or were acknowledged as gifted speakers were recognized as "recorded ministers". Recorded ministers sat with elders and other respected members on the facing benches in the front of the building.

Individual Worship, Community Responsibility

The emphasis on individual worship and "silent waiting" encouraged members to follow their consciences. The same ethic that propelled local Quakers to resist slavery a generation earlier prompted Herbert's mother Hulda to take up the causes of temperance and women's suffrage. Hulda Hoover became more active in the meeting after her husband, Jesse, died in 1880, and took her seat as a recorded minister among the respected members in the facing benches.

The community and extended family came together around the Hoovers after Jesse's death. When Hulda died in 1884, they did the same, with friends and relatives taking guardianship and custody of the orphaned Hoover children. Even Herbert's school teacher offered to adopt him.

From the Friends Church to the Historic Site

An evangelical revival in 1877 led to a split in the Quaker meeting. Six years later conservative members left the meeting to start their own. Though she was distressed by the rift in the community, Hulda was among the progressives who advocated changes in the meeting.

By 1894, the remaining members had renovated the meetinghouse in the plan of a church, removed the partitions, and added an organ and a belfry. They also hired a pastor and constructed a parsonage on site. Silent waiting remained a part of the worship.

In 1915, the crowded meetinghouse building was sold and moved to the east side of Downey Street to make room for a new Friends Church. The new owner remodeled it as the Pastime Theater, where moviegoers could see popular films for five to ten cents. In the 1930's new owners converted the theater into an auto garage.

West Branch citizens working to restore the Hoover birthplace and create a commemorative park considered using the old Meetinghouse as a Hoover museum. The Hoover Birthplace Foundation purchased the meetinghouse and moved it to its present place in 1964.

Restored based on photographs, recollections, and research, the Friends Meetinghouse appears like it did during Herbert's childhood when he and his family attended silent meetings in it.

The benches and partitions came from the nearby Hickory Grove meetinghouse. The cry room was removed from another meetinghouse and added to the women's side, replacing the original cry room that disappeared with previous renovations.

The Friends Meetinghouse reopened in 1965 as part of Herbert Hoover National Historic Site.

Strong training in patience

Herbert Hoover recalled the silent meetings as "strong training in patience" for a young boy. This training put to good use by a man who succeeded in business, fed millions in need, and presided over a nation in the early years of the Great Depression.

At the beginning of the First World War, Herbert, now a successful mining engineer in London, faced an important choice: continue his lucrative engineering work or accept an offer to head up a famine relief effort for Belgium. He wrote, "Mrs. Hoover and I spent a prayerful night, and next morning we concluded that duty called me to accept."

Was this prayerful night a silent meeting of two equal partners, who searched their consciences and their souls for spiritual guidance? Only the Hoovers knew for sure, but the Meetinghouse stands as one of the pillars of Herbert's upbringing, within view of his birthplace, the Presidential Library, the Statue of Isis, and other reminders of his remarkable journey.