

On 26 June 1658, thirty people gathered at the house of Nicholas and Hannah Phelps in the less densely populated region of western Salem called the “woods.”¹ Among them were two strangers, William Brend and William Leddra, who were traveling through the colony to spread the Lord’s message. These men had found a receptive audience in the Salem area, including many people who had been meeting together to share their newfound understanding of the truth for some time. Brend, “a man of years” who had left his family in London, and Leddra, a native of Cornwall living in Barbados, had felt a call to minister to

¹ The outline of this incident can be garnered from the court records relating to it; see *EQC* 2:103–5. Also Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers*, 2 vols. (London, 1753), 2:185–6.

the seed of the faithful in New England. These traveling witnesses, who had come at great personal risk to deliver their message, probably spoke to the townspeople about the changes being brought about in their own time. Indeed, the coming of the end of the world seemed a feasible explanation for what Brend, Leddra, and many others had experienced.

Most of the gathered artisans, housewives, farmers, and maidens would come to share their novel belief that the light of truth and love shone within each of them, providing divine guidance for human actions. Lawrence and Cassandra Southwick, an elderly couple, had been among the first to embrace this view, forsaking Salem Church after nearly twenty years as members to attend these private meetings.² A handful of others were already equally committed to this new faith and had been attending meetings in the Southwicks’ home during the preceding months.

While the Scriptures were familiar to everyone present, no biblical passage was read. Rather, each person waited in silence until called by God to speak. Perhaps the silence was broken by the voice of the Southwicks’ twenty-six-year-old son, Josiah, who shared their sense that God’s message would come to those who waited on him. Actually, it did not matter who spoke at the meeting, or even if no one did. Even Josiah’s younger sister, Provided, who had never spoken publicly before, was free to address her older friends and neighbors; for as the observer of a similar assembly in England recorded, “sometimes girls are vocal in their covenant, while leading men are silent.”³ Regardless of who felt called to witness to the truth, they believed that the words came from

who felt called to witness to the truth, they believed that the words came from the same source.

Participating in this outpouring of the spirit caused such excitement that some people, overcome with emotion, might begin to tremble and shake. The experience of gathering to wait in silence for a sense of the divine will, to hear strangers and neighbors share their testimonies to this truth, and to express the promptings of one's own inner light was an overwhelmingly powerful event. For people accustomed to looking elsewhere for guidance – to their betters in the community, to laws and customs, to the word of God as recorded in the Scriptures and explained by a trained professional – looking inward instead was profoundly exciting. Sharing their new understanding of the truth with other colonists in these unstructured gatherings was an experience without precedent in early Massachusetts, where soul searching was conducted in the privacy of one's closet and public relations of spiritual experiences occurred in formal examinations before the community's visible saints.

The thirty participants in this event were not alone in attaching great signif-

² They had, however, apparently long since ceased to have their children baptized; see Worrall, *Quakers in the Colonial Northeast*, 203n.

³ Francis Higginson, *The Irreligion of the Northern Quakers* (London, 1653), reprinted in *Early Quaker Writings, 1650–1700*, ed. Hugh Barbour and Arthur O. Robert (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), 71.

icance to it. Recognizing the gathering as a radical departure from established practice, the alarmed authorities forcibly brought the meeting to a close. The magistrates, "informed of a disorderly meeting of certaine suspected persons att the house of one Nicholas Phelps of Salem," dispatched the constable, Nathaniel Felton, accompanied by maltster Edmund Batter and tailor John Smith, to the woods.⁴ During the ensuing fracas, three men and four women were apprehended. The two visitors, Brend and Leddra, escaped but were captured a short while later in the neighboring town of Newbury.⁵ The mistress of the house, Hannah Phelps, contributed to the uproar by verbally abusing Smith, whose young wife – Margaret Thompson Smith – was in attendance. Although Goodman Smith would have the satisfaction of seeing Phelps admonished in court for her carriage toward him on that Sabbath day, his efforts failed to alter his own wife's sympathies.

Three days later, on 29 June, the Essex County Court met in Salem and began to take action against this burgeoning movement. The two strangers were examined and "owneing themselves to be such [professed Quakers] were sent to the Howse of Correcon [House of Correction] according to Lawe." There, refusing to work for their bread, they would go without; the jailer would eventually put the intransigent Brend into leg irons and whip him severely.⁶ When the local offenders were brought into court after this sentence had been passed on their friends, many of the men stood with their hats upon their heads. This symbolic statement of contempt for the temporal authority of the magistrates was standard practice among English radicals. The court, cognizant of the meaning these men sought to convey, ordered the court officer forcibly to bare

the local offenders were brought into court after this sentence had been passed on their friends, many of the men stood with their hats upon their heads. This symbolic statement of contempt for the temporal authority of the magistrates was standard practice among English radicals. The court, cognizant of the meaning these men sought to convey, ordered the court officer forcibly to bare their heads. The magistrates then proceeded, dealing with each offender according to the nature of the transgression and the degree of his or her apparent involvement in the Quaker movement. **Nicholas Phelps** was fined for having the meeting in his home as well as for absenting himself from mandatory public worship services and for attending a meeting of Quakers. Lawrence, Cassandra, and Josiah Southwick, Samuel Shattock, Joshua Buffum, and Samuel Gaskill were all imprisoned for "obstinately owning themselves to be such as are called Quakers."⁷ The others were fined or admonished.

Continuing the sentencing of the lesser malefactors into the next month, the court found upon reconvening that a few new offenses had to be tried as well. **Nicholas Phelps** was "fined for defending a Quaker's writing and sent to the house of correction at Ipswich for an indefinite time for confessing himself a Quaker." Seventeen-year-old Provided Southwick, whose parents, elder brother, and future husband were all in prison, had been "calling the Court persecu-

⁴ *EQC* 2:104. ⁵ *Ibid.*, 103; Besse, *Sufferings*, 2:185–6.

⁶ *EQC* 2:103; George Bishop, *New England Judged by the Spirit of the Lord* (London, 1661, 1667; abridged ed., 1703), 64–6.

⁷ *EQC* 2:105.

tors"; she was ordered to the stocks for one hour.⁸ The Salem magistrates attempted to prevent a small but growing number of the town's residents from joining that illegal and disturbing new sect known as the Quakers. They would not succeed.

The group that met at the Phelps house on that Sabbath day in June included many of the early Salem Quakers, the men and women who were responsible for the establishment of the sect in that region. The six people imprisoned immediately after this meeting were staunch and vocal supporters of this innovative faith. Most notably, the three senior Southwicks and Samuel Shattock had already been imprisoned for demonstrating their affinity for the new movement during the preceding year. Shattock had tried to defend a visiting Quaker from the wrath of an orthodox colonist.⁹ All six would remain unreconciled to the colony's established faith until their deaths.

In addition to the committed colonists present, these early, illegal assemblies also undoubtedly attracted a number of kindly disposed or simply curious individuals. When exposed to the excitement that surrounded this rebellion against the established order, they felt drawn to investigate the matter for themselves. While many of these people liked what they found in the informal, emotionally charged gatherings, others were either unimpressed by the Quaker faith or cowed by the legal and social sanctions against these "vile heretics" into returning to the established church. Three of the men present at the Phelps' proved uncommitted to the sect, and at least two of them would return to the orthodox fold during the next few years.¹⁰ Except for three more people, who

charged gatherings, others were either unimpressed by the Quaker faith or cowed by the legal and social sanctions against these “vile heretics” into returning to the established church. Three of the men present at the Phelps’ proved uncommitted to the sect, and at least two of them would return to the orthodox fold during the next few years.¹⁰ Except for three more people, who apparently left the colony entirely, however, the remaining participants in this June meeting embraced the new faith permanently. One decade later, almost fifty colonists were active in the Salem meeting.

The dramatic events on the Phelps farm and at the quarterly court session three days later came at the end of a two-year period of mounting tensions over the introduction of this new sect into New England. The first Quaker witnesses had arrived in the colony in July 1656, and they were followed by a veritable “invasion” of missionaries bent on converting colonists. The authorities, responding swiftly and vehemently, began passing a series of progressively harsher punishments designed to halt the spread of this heresy. Imprisonment, whippings, mutilations, and, finally, banishment on pain of death awaited the “publishers of truth” who came to Massachusetts.¹¹

The repression succeeded in containing the “contagion of Quakerism,” ex-

⁸ Ibid., 107.

⁹ That is, Lawrence, Cassandra, and Josiah. *EQC* 2:53, 55, 104; Besse, *Sufferings*, 2:183–4.

¹⁰ On Thomas Brackett, see Perley, *History of Salem*, 2:252–3, 224; on Robert Adams, see *NEHGR* 9 (1855): 126. The third man, John Hill, although affiliated with Quaker families through both his marriages, never actively supported the sect.

¹¹ *RMB* 4, pt. 1:277–8, 308–24, 345–7.