

THE OLD FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE

by Leah Blackman

Most people interested in the history of the Little Egg Harbor - Tuckerton area are familiar with Leah Blackman's classic history book, "The History of Little Egg Harbor"; however, few are aware that Leah was also a talented and informative poet. No institution had a greater effect on the cultural, economic, and spiritual development of our area than the Friends' Meeting which overlooked the town of Tuckerton from the small rise to the east of the Mill pond. It is no small coincidence that Leah choose the Friends' Meeting House as a subject for one of her poems. The following is a transcription of her poem from her original manuscript on file at the Historical Society Museum.

Leah writes - "Thoughts suggested when viewing the Old Friends' Meeting House at Tuckerton, New Jersey, in the year 1863. This house was built in the year 1709, and taken down in the year 1863, at which date it was 154 years old. " [Editor's Note: The old Meeting House was quickly replaced by a new building, in 1864, which still stands.]



Tuckerton Old Friends Meeting House - circa 1930s

A plain and venerable house
Shaded by oak trees' leafy boughs;
For o'er a cent'ry it has stood,
Near by the millpond's limpid flood,
From which the summer breeze brings showers
Of fragrance from pond lily flowers;
Whose cream-tinted forms lay at rest
With anchors cast in the pond's breast.
Many a calm, many a storm
Have reigned over its humble form;
Many a day warm sunbeams bright
Many a night the moon's pale light
Have gilded this rudely formed place
From its shingled roof to its base
Many an eve the whippoorwill
Has sung by this Church on the hill;
Many a lone midnight has seen

The owl perch'd 'mong the leaflets green
While its voice sounds far and wide
Over the millpond's star-deck'd tide
And many a time the wild breeze
Has shaken these ancient oak trees
And then swept o'er the pond's blue breast
Where closed lily buds were at rest.

One hundred and fifty-four years
Have pass'd since the bold pioneers
Came here with well sharpened edge tools
To build this house by workmen's rules.
'Most eight times twenty years have fled
Since the builders of this Church said
"Next first day the people may meet
For worship in this new house neat."
They came, - and pleasure was express'd
By the settlers who came here dress'd
In homespun robes, - plain hats and caps
And shoes with buckles and with straps.
An hour was pass'd in silence, - then
There was hand shaking 'mong the men.
The women gave cordial greetings
And talked of this and future meetings,
They the mothers of the colony
On the borders of the great sea.

Three times fifty years have pass'd 'way
Since Edward Andrews came here to pray,
And proclaim the gospel to all
Who were assembled in this hall.
Here Mary Falkinburg used to tell
That with the right'ous all would be well,
And Isaac and Peter Andrews came
To preach religion in Christ's name
Seventy years have rolled away
Since Ann Gaunt knelt in this place to pray
And then preach free grace for all
Who sat in silence in this hall.
There Ann Willits often arose
To admonish both friends and foes
But fifty years have roll'd around
Since she was laid in the churchyard's ground.
Here Daniel Parker oftimes stood
To warn the bad and comfort the good.

Many trav'ling preachers have been seen
Passing o'er this lawn of green
Where wild flowers bloom and grass blades spring

And robins and bluebirds oft sing
On this lovely lawn which surrounds
This Meeting House, - with ample bounds
Many ministers have had calls
To rise within these wooden walls
And proclaim glad tidings of grace
To those who sat in this rude place.
Many a fair bride and bridegroom
Have been wed in this ancient room.

Where's the generations who've trod
From age to age this verdant sod
In order to gain the church's walls
And receive the good spirit's calls
And be instructed in the way
That leads to everlasting day.
A something seems to say they've gone
To walk o'er Heaven's flow'ry lawn,
And this is all thou shalt e'er know
Whilst a resident here below.
Within its walls met twice a week
The Redeemer's followers meek
Where in silence they waiting sate
For the calls of the "Spirit" great
Whose pleasant "still small voice" was heard
Repeating many a sweet word
Of peace and happiness to all
Who cordially received its call.

In the rear of this Church is seen
The graveyard with its grassy screen
Where seven generations rest
With earth piled on each one's breast.
Many solemn funeral trains
Have pass'd along its green lanes
Slowly marching to the "place of tombs"
To place the dead in clay built rooms.
Here aged fathers and mothers,
Fair youthful sisters and brothers,
And lovely infants calmly sleep
With naught but bright dewdrops to weep
O'er the grass and flower-deck'd place
Which obscures each one's hallow'd face.
Here saint and sinner side by side
Repose within this churchyard wide
Waiting for the last trumpet's sound
To summon them from this cold ground
To stand before the great "white throne"
To answer for the deeds they've done.

In this unadorned graveyard sleep
Egg Harbor's fathers in silence deep
Their only monument the sod
And wild flow'rs strewn by Nature's God
These sweet flow'rs like true mourners shed
Their fragrant dewdrops o'er the dead.
Here the ground chippit builds its nest
Among the thick grass which is press'd
Over human forms which once were
Active, merry, happy and fair.
Here the "twilight bird" comes to sing
Among the bright wild flow'rs that spring
Above forgotten dead who rest
Far down in the earth's chilly breast.

Beneath this churchyard's turfy breast
Generations of my kindred rest
Yet I cannot go to a mound
And say, "This is my kinsman's ground."
It is as nothing to the dead
Where or how is made their last bed,
But the living desire to trace
Each departed friend's resting place.