

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 28, 2014

How Did They Speak? I have often wondered what sort of accent George Washington had in an attempt to speak the English language. Did he speak with a slight southern drawl like present-day Virginians, or did he have an English accent (as we say in America)? My guess is that it was somewhere in between. When did the Massachusetts Bay colony break away from a true British accent? What did John Hancock and John Adams sound like in 1776? Since Ben Franklin was 17 when he left Boston, did he have a New England accent, rather than speaking like other Philadelphians of his time? Perhaps linguists have studied these things and have answers, but until Thomas Edison's successful recording of the human voice in the late 19th century, do we really know?

The first Europeans to come in large numbers to William Penn's colony surrounding Philadelphia were members of the Religious Society of Friends, called Quakers. Did they speak differently from other immigrants? You bet they did. They used the "Plain Language," where "thee," "thou," "thy," and "thine" replaced "you" and "your," except in the plural. When John Garrett, founder of present-day Yorklyn in 1726, dealt with his Quaker farmer-neighbors at his early grist mill, I'm sure all of them used the plain language, in business as well as in family conversation. Quakers of the 18th and 19th centuries used "thee" and "thy" when speaking with those of other faiths as well. Remember Gary Cooper, depicting a Quaker farmer in southern Indiana during the Civil War in "*Friendly Persuasion*"?

Israel and Elizabeth (Lizzie) Marshall, my paternal grandparents, both from Quaker families near Hockessin Friends Meeting, used "thee and "thy" between themselves and taught their children to do the same. Lizzie used it entirely with whomever she was speaking. I don't know about Israel, but I would suspect he would use "you" when talking to non-Quaker business connections and to those working in the mills. That was certainly the case with his two sons, Warren and Clarence. Letters written in longhand, either personal or business, would use the plain language, where applicable.

Although there were Quakers in the Shallcross ancestry, my mother, Esther Shallcross Marshall, raised as a Presbyterian, had difficulty with the plain language after her marriage. It was certainly well known to her, however, as she had attended a Quaker co-ed boarding school in Swarthmore and had visited her future sister-in-law, Anna, at Auburn Heights as early as 1902. She did well in calling her new in-laws "thee," but sometimes forgot when disciplining me. I tried using the plain language in return but really never succeeded until I was an adult. By that time, it was fading out fast, even in Quaker society.

When I made new acquaintances among Quakers all over the eastern U.S. in 1950–52, as a travel agent booking many to the Friends World Conference in Oxford, England, I thought I should address these devout people with "thee" and "thy." I found most of them didn't know what I was talking about, except in the area around Philadelphia, so I quickly became more modern in my many letters and conversations. Actually, the only time I ever heard "thou" used, however, was when conversing with an 85-year-old Quaker in the north of England in 1951.

In my generation, the plain language is almost dead. I used it when speaking with 10 of my 12 first cousins and with my second cousins, such as Joe Mitchell of Woodside Farm. In this group, all but Joe and Bob Mancill are deceased, and Joe and I haven't used the plain language for some time. I see Bob very seldom, and we might speak either way. Although Ruth and I have been Quakers all our lives, we never used it when conversing. Her mother did.