“…He was one of those extraordinary men, whose career through life excited observation and alarm. If the comparison be admissible, he appeared rather like the comet, which threatens, in its irregular course, the destruction of the worlds near which it passes, than as one of those tranquil orbs which hold their accustomed place, and dispense their light, in the harmonious order of heaven.”1

The Religious Society of Friends has always been devoted to the causes of truth and social justice. In line with their beliefs regarding the equality of all people, many

Friends throughout history were leaders of the abolition movement. It is then perhaps difficult to believe that some Quakers, as tolerant and just as they may have been, were also slave owners themselves. This seems hypocritical, since a fundamental principle of Quakerism is that there is that of God in every person, not that there is that of God in every white person. Forcing others into a lower status violates the Quaker tenet of equality, and financing such a violent business as the slave trade violates the tenet of peace. At least this is how Benjamin Lay viewed slavery, and how he presented his argument to the communities of Philadelphia and Barbados.

Lay’s rhetoric was charged, his writing inflammatory, and actions extreme, but he was a catalyst necessary for sparking the flame of Quaker abolitionism, a movement that was championed by leaders such as John Woolman and Lucretia Mott. Lay might not be the best role model for activists, but his radical campaign against slavery is a story that must be told. Every movement has a beginning, and Lay was one of the first pioneers who roused the consciousnesses of Quakers so that they could never again view slavery in the same way. Although he didn’t see all the fruits of his labors, he was one of those responsible for planting the seeds of abolitionism.

Like many of the leaders opposed to slavery, Benjamin Lay had humble beginnings. Born in Great Britain, he did not receive formal schooling, as his parents could not afford it, but he grew up as a Quaker and understood the faith at a young age. He apprenticed as a glove-maker and then traveled as a sailor before marrying his wife, Sarah, in 1710. By 1718 they had become unpopular in their community in England and moved to Barbados, where the story of Lay’s struggle against slavery begins.²

Barbados at that time was booming from the African slave trade, a practice that became crueler as demand grew. Such inhumanity towards fellow humans prompted a fundamental change in Lay, which biographer Roberts Vaux described as follows:

Thus a witness of scenes which were calculated to excite the keenest sensibility, and awaken the tenderest sympathy of his nature, Benjamin Lay became singularly enlightened, in relation to the injustice and oppression exercised toward the people of Africa. From that moment, every faculty of his mind was exerted, to render odious, not only in the opinion of the community in which he lived, but among mankind

² Ibid, 13-17
universally, a traffic which begot so much crime—entailed so much misery—and threatened such awful retribution from the Omnipotent and regardful Parent of the whole human family.³

From then on, Lay devoted his life to ending the practice of slavery. He began feeding nearby slaves what food he could afford when they visited his house, and he spoke out against the slave trade to all who would listen. The locals, many of whom were involved in the industry, became increasingly opposed to his ideas and wished him to leave.

Sarah Lay, who shared his opposition to slavery, was too disturbed by the barbarities of Barbados to stay. One day, she entered the house of another Friend and saw a “hung up Negro stark naked, trembling and shivering, with such a Flood of Blood under him.”⁴ The Lays decided they could not bring about any changes by themselves by staying there. Sarah even said “she wished to leave Barbadoes, lest by remaining there she might be leavened into the nature of the inhabitants, which was pride and oppression.”⁵

Benjamin and Sarah Lay moved after spending 13 years in Barbados. This time, they traveled to Philadelphia, where they thought their anti-slavery ideals would be welcome. Sadly, they found the Philadelphia Quakers only “timidly discouraged the purchase of slaves.”⁶ These Quakers had even criticized and rejected Ralph Sandiford, an earlier objector to slavery. They did not receive Lay well either, and “thus this champion of justice, human rights, and reformation, found himself again as almost solitary combatant in a field where prejudice and avarice, had marshaled their combined forces against him.”⁷ After one year he and Sarah moved out to Abington, Pennsylvania.⁸

It is important to note that at this point in his life, Benjamin Lay had lived in three different communities and had been largely ostracized in every one of them. Lay was not a person with whom everyone could get along: he had a fiery temper, strong opinions, and a calling so strong for the liberation of slaves that he would shamelessly denounce

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³ Ibid, 18
⁵ Vaux, 20
⁷ Vaux, 22
⁸ Drake, 44
his peers in public for partaking in the practice. Lay was no John Woolman: he was not quiet or even-tempered, and at times he would become so incensed that he was even disrespectful. But had Lay not been persistent, he would have made no impact on the Society of Friends or the greater world. He was a gadfly to his neighbors, and only through constant testimony did he instill in their minds understandings of the true evils of keeping slaves.

It is also necessary to take note of his physical appearance, for it is as equally jarring as his character. He was only four feet seven in height, and had a severe hunchback. His legs appeared disproportionately lean compared to his projecting chest, and he had a long white beard. He had a habit of resting his left hand on his hip in a way that twisted his posture and rendered him even more odd-looking. His strange appearance may have contributed to his uncomfortable relationships with other Friends.

After his one year in Philadelphia, Lay bought a few acres of land in Abington and built a small house for him and Sarah that resembled a cave. He adopted very spartan habits, such as drinking and eating only water, milk, and vegetables; wearing only clothing of his own making; and purchasing no products made at the expense of animal life or slave labor. Lay also spoke out against sins other than slavery throughout his life, such as a public demonstration denouncing tea, where he held up new teacups his wife had bought and shattered them on the ground in front of a crowd.

Once Lay had established himself in Abington, he began his famous career against the practice of slavery. His actions and speeches were so extreme that instead of gaining the support of the community, he alienated himself from them. This is one of the major reasons that Lay was not popular in his time. Rather than be a sympathetic,
concerned figure like the more even-tempered abolitionists, he “remonstrated with
them… with so much indiscreet zeal, as to give great offence.” 12

He was nothing if not persistent, though, because he felt called to serve a just
cause. He created many spectacles, many of which have been written from oral accounts
given by those who knew him. Since most of Lay’s history has been recorded in this
manner, the details of his life vary depending on the source. Also, since few writers took
an interest in Lay while people who knew him were still alive, there are not many
accounts of his life from which other research can be done.

What might be the most well known of his escapades was an elaborate
demonstration involving pokeberry juice at a Meeting in Burlington, New Jersey. Lay
prepared a pig bladder filled with this juice, and placed it inside a hollowed-out Bible. He
then dressed in a military coat with a sword, and concealed the outfit under a large and
simple coat like most Quakers wore at the time. 13 During Meeting he rose and addressed
the congregation with the following words: “Oh all you negro masters who are
contentedly holding your fellow creatures in a state of slavery during life… you might as
well throw off the plain coat as I do.” As Lay removed his overcoat, revealing the
military dress beneath, he continued, “It would be as justifiable in the sight of the
Almighty, who beholds and respects all nations and colours of men with an equal regard,
if you should thrust a sword through their hearts as I do through this book.” 14 He then
stabbed the Bible with his sword, splattering pokeberry juice on the nearby members to
symbolize the bloodshed of enslaved Africans.

Only someone devoted to a radical path of activism could engineer such a
spectacle. Lay was certainly not willing to compromise, and he could not “be persuaded
that it must, from the very nature and constitution of the human mind, be a gradual work,
if ever they were cleansed as a people from the practice, which, even at that time, some of
them, with himself, considered as an offence in the sight of Divine Purity.” 15

12 Benjamin Rush. “Biographical Anecdotes of Benjamin Lay,” in Cyclopaedia of American Literature,
ved=0CDYQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false (Accessed 14 April 2011), 269
13 Vaux, 26
14 Ibid, 27
15 Ibid, 25
In the same vein, Lay wrote a book in 1737 titled *All Slave-Keepers That Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates*. It is about 271 pages in which Lay criticizes slavery and other sins of excess. It is not terribly well organized; in fact, when Lay presented it to be published to his longtime friend, Benjamin Franklin, the pages were neither numbered nor ordered. When Franklin made this observation to Lay, he replied, “It is no matter, print any part thou pleasest first.”

*All Slave Keepers* is one of the earliest writings denouncing the slave trade, and “one of the most vehement ever written.” The main argument of *All Slave-Keepers* is that the slave trade, by nature, goes against the main tenets of Quaker faith. Lay writes, “can be greater Hypocrisy, and plainer contradiction, than for us as a People, to refuse to bear Arms, or to pay them that do, and yet purchase the Plunder, the Captives, for Slaves at a very great Price, thereby justifying their selling of them, and the War, by which they were or are obtained?” His logic is sound, yet the book was met with negative reviews.

In 1738 the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting officially kicked Lay out of the Society of Friends. John Kinsey, clerk of Yearly Meeting, placed advertisements in Andrew Bradford’s *American Weekly Mercury* and Franklin’s *Philadelphia Gazette* stating that Lay was not affiliated with the Society and therefore they should not be held accountable for the contents of his book.

A continual problem that hindered Lay’s ability to reach his audience was that he seemed too intolerant of their mistakes to motivate them to change their ways. *All Slave-Keepers* had this problem, accusing slave keepers, especially “their Preachers and Leaders, which have caused them to err. O Lord my good God and sweet Saviour, be pleased to preserve me from this gross Sin, and all Evil.” It is human nature to balk at such complete criticism, to shield oneself from acknowledging a grave error. Before Lay, the Quaker slave owners in the Philadelphia area had not met with much opposition, with the exception of Ralph Sandiford. Lay’s was a testimony they could not ignore, for he refused to be silenced and continued to preach at Meetings long after he was officially

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16 Rush, 270
18 Lay, 11
19 Drake, 45
20 Lay, 143
read out. At one point in time, he lay down in front of the door of a Meetinghouse during a rainstorm, so that all members who had attended the Meeting needed to step over him to get out. Lay was not going away. He continued to denounce the hypocrisy of Quaker slave owners so that it became difficult to ignore. But the power of denial is strong, especially when provoked by such an inflammatory figure as Lay.

Lay continued to promote abolition with the zealous ingenuity of a gifted activist. However convoluted the message, Lay’s acts always provoked discussion. He was “the subject of admiration for many and the subject of conversation for all.” One snowy day, he stood by the gateway to a Meetinghouse with his right foot unclothed and buried in the snow. As members passed by and implored Lay to cover his foot to avoid exposure, he replied, “Ah, you pretend compassion for me, but you do not feel for the poor slaves in your fields, who go all winter half clad.” Another time, Lay lured the six-year-old son of a slave-owning Quaker family to his house for a few hours of “entertainment.” When the boy’s parents came to Lay’s house to ask for help in the frantic search for their lost child, Lay cried out, “Your child is safe in my house, and you may now conceive of the sorrow you inflict upon the parents of the negro girl you hold in slavery, for she was torn from them by avarice.”

Every one of his actions had a purpose, and he followed his beliefs with unswerving commitment. In the face of the hypocrisy of slave-owning Quakers, he was sure never to contradict himself, even to his detriment. For example, he walked into Philadelphia to visit a family for a meal, but noticed a slave standing nearby. He announced to the family, “I will not share with thee the fruits of thy unrighteousness,” and turned around to head home having eaten nothing. Lay did not eat, wear, or in any way partake in anything that had to do with the slave trade, because he needed to follow the ideals about which he preached.

Lay lived most of his life in Abington without his wife Sarah, for she died in 1735. They had no children, so he was isolated in his house-cave and spent much of his time reading his large book collection, some of the only material possessions he owned.

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21 Drake, 45
22 Rush, 269
23 Vaux, 28
24 Ibid, 29
25 Ibid, 37
He had friends who cared about him, some of them very esteemed: throughout his life he maintained close correspondence with Anthony Benezet, a fellow Quaker and abolitionist, and Benjamin Franklin. The fact that he corresponded with men of such caliber while having so little education of his own is a testament to his intrinsic intelligence and insightfulness.

As Lay grew older and more infirm, he calmed down his conduct and performed fewer stunts. He adopted more habits to pass the time, like beekeeping and meditation, staying in his home more as he became less able. By the time he had reached his advanced age, he was better known in the community and even sought out for advice. One time, at a funeral, an admirer of Lay struck up a conversation with him and declared himself Lay’s “most humble servant,” to which Lay stuck out his foot and replied, “then clean my shoes.” The guest was tickled by Lay’s wit, and asked him to articulate his thoughts on the way to heaven. Lay answered, “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

Lay stayed true to his statement to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” He was governed by his beliefs alone and not by the opinions of others, as is shown in times when he fell under great disfavor but remained committed to his cause. Since he was always true to himself, he demonstrates the Quaker value of integrity as well as equality, for he devoted much of his life trying to achieve for African slaves the equal status they deserved. It is saddening to realize that Lay, who had been read out from the Society of Friends, embodied the faith and practices of Quakerism to a much greater extent than many of its own members at that time, who owned slaves.

But just because Lay was aging did not mean he had given up his methods of speaking out against slavery altogether. Roberts Vaux, who wrote the longest and most comprehensive biography of Benjamin Lay to date, described one of Lay’s demonstrations:

On one occasion, he walked into the Oxford church, with a mantle of sack-cloth wrapped round him, and stood attentively listening to the sermon which was preaching. When the services of the morning were over, Lay thus began an address to the congregation. *I do not approve of all the minister has said, but I did not come*
here to find fault with the preaching; I came to cry aloud against your practice of slave-holding.27

This is an example of a time Lay spoke to religious congregations that were not Quaker, something he did often to spread the ideas of abolitionism beyond the reaches of the Society of Friends. When he made speeches like these, he sometimes talked for so long that he would be removed from the house of worship.28 He created a spectacle in Yearly Meeting when he sat himself between the male and female sections, with three pipes stuck in the bosom of his shirt. “There he sat, till meeting was ready to break up; then he rose, dashed one pipe down amongst the ministers in the men’s side, another amongst the women, and the third amongst the common people;—as much to say, they were all of a piece.”29 Opposing sins of excess was not Lay’s true calling the way abolitionism was, but he still felt strongly enough about it to give testimony against it.

Lay performed another peculiar action in his autumn years, and that was to attempt to fast for forty days in a recreation of the forty-day fast of Jesus Christ. He continued all his daily habits, including walking long distances to visit friends, but ate nothing. After three weeks he fell ill but refused food, so his friends had to wait until he was too weak to protest and then nurse him back to health.30 It is believed that the attempted fast accelerated his decline and eventual death.

Unlike some other Quaker abolitionists, Benjamin Lay lived long enough to see some of his labors come to fruition. Close to the end of his life, a friend visited Lay to tell him of the decision made by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to “disown members who bought or sold Negroes, and to encourage those who held slaves to set them free.”31 After hearing these words and pondering them, Lay called out, “Thanksgiving and praise be rendered unto the Lord God. I can now die in peace.”32

And Benjamin Lay did die in peace. He was laid to rest in Friends’ burial grounds at Abington, on property that no longer accepted the practice of slavery. He had never had much money, but had directed forty pounds in his will for the education of poor

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27 Vaux, 34
28 Ibid, 35
29 Hunt, 274
30 Vaux, 47
31 Drake, 46
32 Ibid, 46
children at Abington Meeting, a service he could do for others but which had never been done for him.\textsuperscript{33}

We can never know how the anti-slavery movement would have been different had Benjamin Lay not been a part of it. He was widely disliked for his unorthodox demonstrations and even written off as deranged, but “perhaps the turbulence and severity of his temper were necessary to rouse the torpor of the human mind.”\textsuperscript{34} He was an anomaly in Quaker history, a brief spark of extremism in the fabric of time that lit the path of abolitionism long after his death. Every movement requires activists that serve different functions. Some are needed for the practical measures and compromises that slowly marshal support and bring progress. But there are those whose sole purpose is to shock, stir the emotions of others, and instill in the minds of all the moral duty they have to serving truth and social justice. Lay was one of those people. However radical his methods were, he defied the criticisms of all around him, unswervingly followed what he believed to be just, and spoke truth to power.

\textsuperscript{33} Vaux, 52
\textsuperscript{34} Rush, 271
Bibliography


