Like many other early modern religious movements, the Quakers have inspired a rich historiography examining their origins, beliefs, institutional structures and schisms.[[1]](#footnote-1) These are normal topics for denominational history, but the Quakers have attracted additional interest because of the apparently precocious positions they have taken on an array of issues including the empowerment of women, the maintenance of just relations between colonists and Native Americans, and the abolition of slavery.[[2]](#footnote-2) Quakers have grappled with issues that draw scholarship, and they are particularly good subjects for the study of the early modern era because they were articulate in expressing their disagreements, and generally good note-takers. Many of the disputes that have made the Quakers intriguing for historians started in the early years of Quakerism and continued for centuries.[[3]](#footnote-3)

From the 1650s forward, debates among the Quakers routinely engaged people on both sides of the Atlantic. Some Protestant churches maintained a strong sense of imperial hierarchy and marginalized their colonial branches. Other Protestant groups in America diverged from their European forebears and grew distinct. The Quakers, by contrast, maintained respectful relations between meetings across different parts of the English Empire and formed a truly transatlantic community.[[4]](#footnote-4) As a consequence, Quakerism presents rich opportunities for study. Unlike works that concentrate on one region, for example examining New England churches for their evolving opinions on commerce, or Virginian churches for their views on race relations, studies of Quakerism can be transatlantic and encompass all of the colonies, Britain, and all of the United States, at least through the first few decades following the American Revolution.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As a group, the Quakers were articulate witnesses to the broad sweep of history in the early modern era. They were also often influential players in politics, but they were seldom comfortable near the center of power. From the courts of the Stuart kings to the merchants’ coffeehouses of colonial Charleston and the lobbies of the U.S. Congress, Quakers mingled with the privileged, but as a group they remained anxious about the compromises and contradictions inherent in their acquisition of power, money and social status. Their anxiety gave them a peculiarly informative perspective on their times.

The three articles in this forum exemplify what we can learn by studying Quakers. Quakers were often incisive commentators on the world around them. On occasion, they were also deft political actors who formed brittle, difficult alliances with others. Many of their most celebrated accomplishments were team efforts in which the Quakers worked within a wide network of alliances.[[6]](#footnote-6) Political negotiation required compromise, and throughout the early modern period there were always some Quakers who avoided politics for that reason. But others, mixing with outsiders, some were ready to give a little, and some compromised so thoroughly that they eventually abandoned everything that had seemed to make their religious society distinct. Even among those who in the end left Quakerism behind, the process that brought them to that end was sometimes impressively creative, formative and revealing. The internal and external struggles of the Quakers can tell us much about cultural and political power throughout the British Empire and the United States.

Few historians have ever argued that Quakers were close to the levers of power in Massachusetts in the early 1660s. Most of the Quaker missionaries who came there were whipped out of the colony. Occasionally they were hanged. But as Adrian Weimer demonstrates in her study of Elizabeth Hooton’s missionary work, Hooton and other Quakers in Massachusetts discovered cleavages within the structure of power in the colony and exploited them. Hooton arrived in the colony claiming to have royal backing, and she eventually endeared herself to the commissioners Charles II had sent to Massachusetts. Her actions exposed divisions not only among the magistrates, who differed in their response to Quaker provocations, but also among other colonists who waivered when asked to enforce the colonial government’s measures. The dynamics she describes resemble those Evan Haefeli has analyzed in New Netherland, where toleration was situational and contingent, and defining the limits of religious liberty entailed an element of struggle, a test of wills that reflected the distribution of power in any given moment.[[7]](#footnote-7) In Massachusetts in the early 1660s legal, religious and moral authority were unstable and contested even more than in England, and as a result religious leaders like Hooton had to manoeuvre nimbly and negotiate constantly in order to survive.

The Quakers provide Weimer a way to examine toleration and politics across Massachusetts. The unusual pattern of persecution the Quakers faced in Massachusetts also open up for Weimer dynamics within the Religious Society of Friends. For generations scholars have identified distinct periods in Quaker history, with an early period of prophetic witness giving way a time of pragmatic political engagement, which then eclipsed by an era of an inward-looking withdrawal from politics. According to one scheme the Restoration of Charles II of was a turning point, when the Quakers committed themselves to the peace testimony and promised to play a less disruptive role in politics.[[8]](#footnote-8) More recently scholars have emphasised the 1670s as another critical transition, when the Quakers started to operate more effectively in English imperial politics. Weimer’s analysis of Hooton suggests not only that periods of prophesy and politics overlapped, but perhaps that they were never distinct at all. Prophetic Quaker witnesses like Mary Dyer, who dared the New England Puritans to kill her, lived contemporaneously with Quakers like the politically attuned Edward Burrough, who advanced rationalist arguments in favour of toleration and positioned himself more as a citizen than a prophet. Hooton, intriguingly, had much in common with both Dyer and Burrough. During her battles and negotiations with the Massachusetts magistrates she alternated between prophetic and lawyerly modes, sometimes literally changing her clothes from dresses to sackcloth and back, one day at a time. The Quakers’ prophetic stance did not wither away with the Restoration, nor did it expire with Dyer and her fellow martyrs. On the contrary, through the eighteenth century and beyond, Quaker meetings contained would-be prophets, pragmatists, and quietists together. Indeed, the impulses that scholars have sometimes assigned to distinct periods could inspire individuals like Hooton all at once. Seventeenth-century Quaker ministers generally adopted a responsive, “experimental” approach to religious life. They saw political persecution as a test of their convictions but also as an opportunity to learn. When faced with a challenge they had to be alert to the dynamics of the moment. In some settings accepting martyrdom was appropriate, while in others it was not. Hooton settled in the short run for a measure of toleration that guaranteed neither the triumph of Quaker principles nor liberty of conscience in any abstract, general, philosophically consistent sense.

Benjamin Carp’s essay, like Weimer’s, studies Quakers in a trying environment, but the Quakers in colonial South Carolina faced a different kind of test. He examines three Quaker merchants, Samuel Rowland Fisher, William Dillwyn, and Joseph Atkinson, each of whom came to South Carolina from afar. Though they were all committed Quakers when they arrived, and they all tried to settle in South Carolina, two of them eventually left the colony, and the one who remained left Quakerism. By considering the experiences and commentary of these men, Carp is able to examine South Carolina from the perspective of people who were initially, to paraphrase Atkinson, neither edified nor entertained by the purported the delights of the place. Their comments and reactions tell us much about the limits of the white colonists’ social inclusiveness. Charleston’s merchants and civic leaders generally prided themselves on their politeness, civility, and “gentle demeanour.” This last attribute was particularly important to them in that it demonstrated that they were ready to exchange ideas and goods with strangers, and that they were active participants in an increasingly cosmopolitan commercial world. Unwilling to suspend moral judgment, Quaker merchants like Fisher shunned “disagreeable company.” They refused to dress or speak like their “polished” neighbours, and in short they seemed obstinate and rude. Faced with such Quakers, the polite people of Charleston did not simply exclude them from their company. On the contrary, they often charmed, or depending on your perspective, seduced them with hospitality. As a result, many of the Quakers who came to Charleston slid away, as Dillwyn observed, “into conformity with their neighbours.” Others responded more creatively, like the slave trader Zephania Kingsley Jr., who disregarded many of the Quakers’ moral strictures but retained a fondness for silent Quaker meetings. Not coincidentally, in the nineteenth century Kingsley took an idiosyncratic stance in the debate over the morality of slaveholding. His contribution to those discussions reflected a continuing openness in South Carolina society that was a legacy of its colonial-era cosmopolitanism.

At the same time, however, the debate over slavery debate revealed South Carolina’s resistance to currents affecting other parts of the world. Like many other outsiders, Quaker travelers to the colony were struck by its large black presence. Many were dismayed by what they saw, and they privately expressed concern that slavery had corrupted South Carolina’s white society. This sentiment was shared by Quakers like Dillwyn who maintained an egalitarian outlook and others like Fisher who had at best an ambivalent reaction when he found himself in the presence of large numbers of blacks. Regardless of their ultimate views on race, Quaker observers recognized slavery’s formative role in shaping South Carolina’s white culture, and they knew that if they were to join the colony’s elite they would have to accommodate themselves to a social structure and value system made possible by slaveholding.

Sophia Hume was one of the most celebrated moral reformers among the Quakers in the eighteenth century, but her South Carolina upbringing and her fear of slave rebellion led her to argue against the distribution of abolitionist literature in the colony. The great Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet respected Hume, and in an unusual concession to her South Carolina sensibility, when he sent her reform literature for distribution in the colony he censored himself and omitted any reference to the immorality of the slave trade or slaveholding. Since the 1750s, Quakers elsewhere in the British Empire had defined themselves as vocal opponents of the slave trade, but at least through the 1760s they made an exception for South Carolina. William Dillwyn, one of the merchants Carp studies, became an abolitionist, but he took a public stand only after leaving South Carolina permanently for England.

Benezet and Dillwyn recognized the limits of their freedom of action when they refrained from engaging in antislavery activism in South Carolina. Neither man was silenced, but they chose to speak in places where they were likely to be heard. Like Hooton in Massachusetts, they worked within constraints imposed upon them by their political circumstances, and also like Hooton, they took advantage of their transatlantic connections to mobilize influence from a distance. This pattern of behaviour continued among antislavery Quakers through the Revolutionary era. In the last of the essays in this forum,, Nicholas P. Wood shows how the Quakers’ opposition to slavery was modulated in response to changes in the political climate in different jurisdictions. Antislavery Quakers were both principled and pragmatic. With an eye toward positive outcomes, they were sometimes ready to defy authority, but more often they exploited legal opportunities to exert influence.

Before the American Revolution most of North Carolina’s Quaker slaveholders refused to free their slaves because colonial statutes forbade them from doing so, and so the slaves they tried to manumit could be re-enslaved under worse circumstances. Eventually, however, some Quakers chose to break the law, not only by freeing their slaves but also by physically helping them escape North Carolina. In 1782, for example, Caleb Trueblood helped transport a man and a woman out of the state. Trueblood was a lawbreaker, but like Hooton more than a century earlier, he was also ready to operate through formal political channels. He and other members of the Quakers’ “North Carolina Standing Committee” hired expensive lawyers to argue for the rights of fugitives from slavery and “dark-complexioned citizens” in general. They corresponded with their counterparts in Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Quakers sent them antislavery tracts. The North Carolina Quakers eventually reciprocating with legal arguments against the recapture of fugitive and former slaves. The northward migration of manumitted and escaped slaves made this consultation urgent. Job Albert, Jacob Nicholson, Jupiter Nicholson and Thomas Pritchet, were part of the revolutionary-era migrant flow from North Carolina to Pennsylvania. In 1797, in consultation with Quakers, Albert, Nicholson, Nicholson and Pritchet petitioned Congress to protect their freedom. Though they did not get the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 repealed, they eventually received a hearing and congressional recognition that they were citizens of the United States.

These were the first black petitioners to Congress, and by tracing their lives and work Wood reveals how intimately they were connected to the Quakers. When drafting and arranging delivery of their petition they called in assistance from a network of Quakers and lawyers who had previously sued the state of North Carolina over the application of its anti-manumission laws. Through lawsuits and petitions, an interracial coalition of advocates for black freedom had developed, and together these men and women advanced some of the most sophisticated constitutional arguments available at the time. They interrogated the legal impact of the Declaration of Independence, the meaning of citizenship, the retrospective application of laws, the relationship between state and federal government, and—within both levels of government—the deference the legislature owed the judiciary, and vice versa. Quakers played an indispensible role in these efforts, and so too did Albert, Nicholson, Nicholson, Pritchet and other black petitioners.

In addition to providing new insight into the mobilization of political influence on questions of race and slavery in the revolutionary era, Wood’s article also tells us much about emancipation as a lived experience in the days of gradual abolition. Many, if not most, of the members of the North Carolina Standing Committee were slaveholders. Thomas Nicholson, a prominent figure in the committee died a slaveholder because he delayed emancipating his slaves until they had reached the age of 21. While many Quakers may have felt remorse over their former behaviour as masters, after they embraced the project of emancipation they still thought that delaying manumission would benefit young slaves. With what they believed were benevolent intentions, they also planned to maintain close relations with former slaves after they had been legally freed. This impulse led some to hire runaways, open schools for former slaves, host weddings for them, worship with them, and assist them in petitioning congress. Wood has identified an important, underappreciated strand of interracial activism in the 1790s, but it is important to keep in mind that, at least when viewed from the perspective of Quakers, that activism did not stand in simple opposition to slavery. On the contrary, most Quakers continued to advocate temporary, benevolent slaveholding.

While elucidating the complex mix of voices that produced the 1797 petition to Congress, Wood argues strongly against earlier approaches that sought to attribute that document to one or another distinct set of authors. The petition was not simply the work of lawyers, African Americans, or repentant Quaker slaveholders. People fitting those descriptions, along with others, participated in the exchanges of information and the debate that made the petition possible. Likewise, Quakers were intimately connected to the entire project of gradual emancipation, but they were not the sole authors of that program. Something similar might be said about religious toleration in colonial Massachusetts and the culture of cosmopolitanism in colonial South Carolina. To fully appreciate the value of studying Quakers, we need to move beyond any impulse to assign them unique credit or blame. Among some historians and present-day members of the Society of Friends there is an impulse to sanctify the most prominent of the early Quakers, to suggest that these men and women stood apart from their neighbours and bore witness against the evils of their day. In academic writing, few historians assert openly that the best of the early Quakers spoke timeless truths, but some come close when they declare that Quakers were “ahead of their time.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Weimer, Carp, and Wood, by contrast, situate the Quakers they study closely within their contemporary social contexts. By recognizing differences among the Quakers and by closely examining tacit alliances between Friends and royal commissioners, slaveholding merchants, slaves and former slaves, lawyers and congressmen, these historians demonstrate how, for better or worse, Quakers became complicit and powerful actors in several morally flawed societies. We need this kind of study in order to better understand the history of Quakerism, but more importantly in order to appreciate what Quaker history can tell us about the wider world. Quakers were political players. They could be opportunistic, guilt-ridden, manipulative inquisitive, and judgmental. They were often articulate. By studying them in context we can learn a great deal about the British Empire and the early years of the United States.

1. For the origins of Quakerism in Britain see Rosemary Moore, *A Light in their Consciences*: *Early Quakers in Britain, 1646-1666* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). See also Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion, eds., *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought, 1647-1723* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For an overview of the history of Quakerism in America see Thomas D. Hamm, *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On women within Quaker meetings see Rebecca Larsen, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700-1775* (New York: Knopf, 1999). On Quakers and Native Americans see Daniel K. Richter, “Land and Words,” in Richter, *Trade, Land, Power: The Struggle for Eastern North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 135-54. But see also Dawn G. Marsh, *A Lenape Among the Quakers: The Life of Hannah Freeman* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). On Quakers and slavery see Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012); Brycchan Carey and Geoffrey Plank, eds., *Quakers and Abolition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For early wide-ranging controversy see Geoffrey Plank, “Discipline and Divinity: Colonial Quakerism, Christianity, and ‘Heathenism’ in the Seventeenth Century,” *Church History* 85:3 (September 2016) 1-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Jordan Landes, *London Quakers in the Trans-Atlantic World: The Creation of an Early Modern Community* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an example of this kind of work see Sarah Crabtree, *Holy Nation: The Transatlantic Quaker Ministry in an Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is most obvious, perhaps, in connection with the founding of Pennsylvania. See Jean R. Soderlund, *Lenape Country: Delaware Valley Society Before William Penn* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Mary K. Geiter, “The Restoration Crisis and the Launching of Pennsylvania, 1679-1681,” *English Historical Review* 112 (1997) 300-318; Patrick M. Erben, *A Harmony of the Spirits: Translation and the Language of Community in Early Pennsylvania* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); John Smolenksi, *Friends and Strangers: The Making of a Creole Culture in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Evan Haefeli, *New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (New York: Viking, 1984), 129-169. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In an unscientific survey using J-Store, a search for scholarly works with the terms “Quaker” and “ahead of their time” in the text yielded 49 entries. Similar searches with “ahead of his time” and “ahead of her time” yielded 181 and 60 hits, respectively. There is some duplication in these numbers, and the Quakers may not have always been the ones “ahead of their time” in some of the pieces, but I suspect that in most instances they were. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)