



12-18-2015

# The Oatmeal Brigade: Quaker Life During the Civil War

Anika N. Jensen  
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

Jensen, Anika N., "The Oatmeal Brigade: Quaker Life During the Civil War" (2015). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 133.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/133>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/133>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# The Oatmeal Brigade: Quaker Life During the Civil War

## Abstract

Quakers in the Civil War seems like an inherently contradictory idea; the Society of Friends practices pacifism and nonviolence, and, for many, putting money or resources toward war efforts goes against the faith. But tensions were high in 1861, and deviations from Quakerism were made when Friends, both Northern and Southern, had to choose whether to prioritize the sanctity of union, support abolition, or remain neutral. Each of these decisions had its share of repercussions within the religious community, and the Quakers themselves found their mindsets changing as the tide of the war rolled on, whether they chose to fight, support the war effort, or abstain from involvement [*excerpt*].

## Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Quaker Faith

## Disciplines

History | History of Religion | Military History | United States History

## Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

---

### The Oatmeal Brigade: Quaker Life During the Civil War

*December 18, 2015*

*By Annika Jensen '18*

Quakers in the Civil War seems like an inherently contradictory idea; the Society of Friends practices pacifism and nonviolence, and, for many, putting money or resources toward war efforts goes against the faith. But tensions were high in 1861, and deviations from Quakerism were made when Friends, both Northern and Southern, had to choose whether to prioritize the sanctity of union, support abolition, or remain neutral. Each of these decisions had its share of repercussions within the religious community, and the Quakers themselves found their mindsets changing as the tide of the war rolled on, whether they chose to fight, support the war effort, or abstain from involvement.

Friends had to decide which was the greater sin: violence or slavery. Quakerism preached against both, leaving its subjects in opposition to the South's Peculiar Institution but unwilling to take up arms against the Confederacy. Some, like Daniel Wooton, enlisted for the preservation of the Union and became engaged in the morality of the fight: "We all know the Bible says thou shalt not kill: but what are we to do with those persons that rebel against the law of our country," the young cavalryman wrote to a friend back home. "Did God set dow[n] and let the Devil take the uppermost seat in heaven when he caused the rebellion there? no Sir!" This appeal to religion serves as justification for Wooton, but it also presents a question: which tenet of Quaker faith was the most important?

Even as Wooton enlisted and became more supportive of the Union cause, some Quakers were caught up in the dilemma of conscription. Those who wished to remain free of the violence attempted to push for conscientious objector status, but they were often met with hefty fines to avoid the draft and public disapproval. In April 1862 a group of North Carolina friends visited the State Assembly in an attempt to plead for exemption, which was granted "upon the payment of a \$100 tax or the performance of alternative service, such as working in the coastal Salt Works or as medics." This was nullified by the Confederate Conscription Bill passed only two days after, and it was not until that October that Quakers were free from the draft by the Exemption Act. The act did, however, require friends to send a substitute or pay a \$500 fine.



*“Quaker guns” were used to deceive enemy forces during the Civil War. These wooden logs were not dangerous but looked like cannons from a distance. Photo courtesy of civilwar.org*

Quakers were thus faced with choosing isolation from their faith or their communities. Some who decided to take up arms were scrutinized and condemned by the Society of Friends, but those who abstained from combat, both Union and Confederate, were accused of being unpatriotic and sympathizing with the adversary. Quaker civilians also faced difficult choices; though she was a Southerner, Delphina Mendenhall welcomed starved and tattered Union soldiers into her home because it aligned with her religious principles of generosity and compassion. This would not have been a popular act, but it attests to the dedication and morality of the Quakers.

The war certainly complicated life for Friends, making them choose between different compelling yet contrasting ideologies of their faith. They were forced to pick the lesser of two evils, faced either with disapproval from their congregation or moral conundrum. Some would not even support the war effort, believing that it was inherently against their moral and religious code. For Quaker soldiers, however, the war served to enhance their decision to fight. Daniel Wooton, who had enlisted apprehensively and spent his first few years battling shame and regret, became hopelessly devoted to his service after the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, appealing to faith and God to justify his decision: “I came to the conclusion by serving my country I would be serving my God and friends also, therefore I resolved to enlist and risk my chances with that of my fellow soldiers.”

There is no one trend, then, for Quaker behavior in the Civil War. Each position held risks, and Friends were forced to determine which element of their religion was of the most significance: abolition or nonviolence. The motivations behind the choices made were, however, more visible.

Quaker faith would remain steadfast during war time but Quaker justifications, as with all religions, were tuned to fit a moral code.

---

Sources:

Curtis, Peter H. "A Quaker and the Civil War: The Life of James Parnell Jones." *Quaker History* 67, no. 1 (1978): 35-41. Accessed November 18, 2015. America: History and Life.

Nelson, Jacquelyn S. "Civil War Letters of Daniel Wooton: The Metamorphosis of a Quaker Soldier." *Indiana Magazine of History* 85, no. 1 (1989): 50-57. Accessed November 18, America: History and Life.

Rogers, Abbie. "Confederates and Quakers: The Shared Wartime Experience." *Quaker History* 99, no. 2 (2010): 1-19. Accessed November 18, 2015. America: History and Life.

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/12/18/the-oatmeal-brigade-quaker-life-during-the-civil-war/>