

Jemima Wilkinson, The Public Universal Friend



Jemima Wilkinson, the first American-born woman to found a religious movement, was born in Rhode Island in about 1752, of Quaker parents. In 1776 she fell ill of a fever. She awoke from a coma and told those standing by that Jemima had died and a spirit from heaven now inhabited her body. She never again used her birth name and until her death in 1819 was always referred to as the Public Universal Friend.

Her teachings were influenced both by the somewhat mystical version of Quakerism current at the time, by the Shaker movement founded a few years earlier by Mother Anne Lee, and by the New Light Methodists, whose meetings she had attended. She wore androgynous clothing, rode horseback, let her hair hang loose on her shoulders and wore a man's broad-brimmed hat; and she preached in public, a tremendous novelty for a woman in the 1770s. She preached all over southern New England and beginning in 1782, in the Philadelphia area. Sometime about the middle 1780s she determined to remove her followers from the persecution and distractions attendant on living among people not of her faith.

Beginning in 1785 or 1786 some of her followers began to enter the Genesee Country for the purpose of finding a site for their settlement. Western New York had before the Revolution been off bounds for American settlers, the British choosing to leave the nations of the Iroquois Confederacy unmolested. Both New York and Massachusetts were still locked in a dispute over which state should have sovereignty over the area, since the natives had been driven out by General John Sullivan's expedition in 1779.

In the summer of 1787, a party of three scouts from the Universal Friend's society travelled from New Milford CT to Philadelphia. They were Thomas Hathaway, Richard Smith and Abraham Dayton. They went on horseback into the Wyoming Valley of western Pennsylvania. There they met a man named Spalding who gave them directions on how to find Seneca Lake. The scouts found Sullivan's path and followed it up the east side of the lake to the site of Geneva, and thence some miles down the west side to a place called Kashong, where a Seneca village had been

destroyed and where a pair of French traders and their Cayuga wives now resided. The traders, named Dominic DeBartzch and Joseph Poudre, told the scouts they had travelled all over Canada and the West, and this was the finest land to be had anywhere. The no-doubt travel-weary scouts were willing to be persuaded and explored a little. They returned to the Universal Friend with a favorable report.

Early the following summer a party of 25 of the Friend's pioneers met at Schenectady and embarked on batteaux. They followed the water route up the Mohawk, and overland into the drainage of the Seneca River. They found only Elark Jennings's rude cabin at the site of Geneva, and went by water up the east side of Seneca Lake to Kendaia or Apple Town, another of the villages that Sullivan had destroyed. They searched there unsuccessfully for a mill site, and attracted by the sound of falling water they crossed the lake and found there the mouth of the Outlet of Keuka Lake. This being a perennial stream with excellent water power capability, they determined to found their settlement nearby, on a knoll now called City Hill, about a mile south of the Outlet and a short distance inland, on the ancient Indian path from the Susquehanna country up into Canada. This was the first permanent white settlement in western New York.

The Friend herself joined her followers in the early spring of 1790; by that time nearly all of her people who ever did come to the then-wilderness had already arrived, perhaps 300 persons in all. Of course, they never enjoyed the isolation they originally sought, being the unwitting vanguard of one of the first (and greatest) of many surges of westward migration in American history. Furthermore, the land many of them settled turned out to be in the limbo between the two Pre-Emption Lines, and a good title was in some cases very hard to come by. This and other problems led in 1794 to the Friend and some of her people moving a few miles west into the present town of Jerusalem. She died there in 1819, in an impressive and elegant house which still stands high on the hill overlooking the valley of Sugar Creek.

The Society of Universal Friends did not long survive its charismatic founder. Her portrait, her Bible, many of her papers and other belongings may be seen at the Oliver House Museum in Penn Yan. Her lasting influence is still a subject of study, whether she was a forerunner of the religious and other reform movements that periodically swept western and central New York in the 19th century, and whether she had any influence on the emerging rights of women (one of those movements). Certainly she drew a group of tough and high-minded people to this area right at its very beginning; they dominated the development of Yates County during the first century after its settlement, and even now some of their descendants still live and work here.