

Understanding Quaker Dates

Basic Premise

There are two elements of the modern calendar that were not always the same as they are today. One is the starting day of the year. The other is the rule for assigning leap years. Both of these changes must be taken into account in order to correctly interpret the Quaker nomenclature for writing dates.

Starting Day of the Year - "New Style" versus "Old Style"

Romans started their year on the 1st of January and this practice continued over most of the developed world until the 7th century A.D., when various alternatives for marking the start of a new year gained favour, usually based on major religious festivals. Beginning in the late twelfth century A.D., the ecclesiastical year in England was defined to begin on March 25 (known as Conception Day in England and the Feast of the Annunciation in southern Europe). Beginning in the fourteenth century and lasting until the year 1752, March 25 was also adopted as the start of the British civil and legal year. This mode of expressing dates is known as the "Old Style" (or "OS"), as opposed to the "New Style" (or "NS"), which is in use today. The "Old Style" method for beginning a new year on March 25th, was brought to an end in Britain and its colonies, including North America, by an Act of Parliament that decreed the day following 31-DEC-1751 to be the first day of 1752. The reader may find some non-Quaker documents that use nomenclature showing both OS and NS dates, such as, January 20, 1750/51. In this case, both the years appear in the sequence, OS/NS.

Leap Year Adjustments - Julian versus Gregorian

In the Julian calendar, there were normally 365 days to the year, with every fourth year being a leap year and having 366 days. Unlike today, the Julian calendar contained no additional refinement to 'tweak' the leap year adjustment. This omission meant that there was a slight difference between the Julian computation of what constituted "a year" and the time it actually takes for the earth to orbit the sun. Because of this difference, the Julian calendar was accumulating one too many days every 128 years. In March, 1582, Pope Gregory XIII issued an order to correct the Julian calendar. This involved two changes. First, the accumulated deficient of 10 days was eliminated, by making October 5, 1582, become October 15. He also ordered that on a go-forward basis, three leap years would be dropped every 400 years, by making century years into leap years only when the century number was evenly divisible by 400. Thus 1600 and 2000 were leap years, while 1700, 1800 1900 were not. This new calendar was known as the Gregorian calendar. In Britain and its colonies, including its North American colonies, and many other English-speaking countries as well, this change was not implemented until 1752. In that year, the same Act of the British Parliament that decreed the new year to start on January 1st, also decreed that 02-SEP-1752 would be followed by 14-SEP-1752. Eleven days needed to be dropped this time, instead of just 10, because the Julian calendar had accumulated another 'extra' day between 1582 and 1752.

Quaker Dates

The authors of Quaker records did not use names for months of the year; they used only numbers. The first month of the year was designated as number 1, the second month was number 2, and so on. Under the "Old Style" criteria, March was month 1, because that was the month in which the new year began. The other months followed in the usual order, with December being month 10 and February being month 12. Thus "20d 11m 1750", would be January 20, 1750 on a Julian calendar basis. However, because of the 11 days that were dropped when moving to the Gregorian calendar, this date would actually be the equivalent of January 31st in our Gregorian view of the world. A complicating issue for Quaker records is that the Old Style of starting the new year on March 25th continued to be used long after the dropping of the 11 days that occurred during the 1752 Julian to Gregorian change-over. Thus, a Quaker record written as "20d 11m 1810" in "Old Style" format, would be January 20, 1810 on a "New Style", Gregorian basis and there would be no need for any 11 day adjustment. The best advice for transcribing Quaker dates seems to be "don't change them!" Copy them exactly as they appear in the original source material. If you are looking at a Quaker date that has already been transcribed by someone else, be wary!

One thing that I am not certain about is if any post-1752 Quakers continued to use both the Old Style nomenclature and the Julian calendar; that is, without the 11 days being dropped and without the new rule for leap years. At this point, I am assuming that none of them did so but I don't know that for certain. I would be interested in hearing from anyone who has a definitive answer to this uncertainty. Please email: Info@JustUs.ca

Thanks

Many thanks to "Patricia" for pointing out that I had not followed these rules with my own family history website. The marriage of my 2nd great grandparents, Jonathan Brown and Anna Baker, is recorded in the Queensbury Monthly Meeting book as "[21d 12m 1809](#)", while a handwritten note by my grand aunt, Marion Alice Brown, shows the date as "[21 2 1809](#)". Obviously, the MM record used the "Old Style", while my grand aunt used the "New Style" and both dates represent February 21, 1809. I had originally been confused about this and had a note regarding this confusion on my website. Based upon Patricia's advice and the foregoing narrative, I have replaced my website's incorrect note with a hyperlink to this document.