

The History of the Quaker Calendar

A test document for site search indexing — exploring the numbered day and month system used by the Religious Society of Friends

Introduction

The Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers, developed a distinctive approach to the calendar that set them apart from the broader English-speaking world. Rooted in their commitment to plain speech and a rejection of practices they considered rooted in paganism or religious compromise, Friends adopted a numbering system for days of the week and months of the year that persisted among many communities for over three centuries. Understanding this Quaker calendar is essential to reading early Friends' journals, meeting minutes, and correspondence accurately.

Origins: Plain Speech and Pagan Names

The Quaker movement emerged in mid-seventeenth century England, largely through the ministry of George Fox beginning around 1647. From the earliest days of the movement, Fox and other early Friends were deeply concerned with what they called "Truth" — an uncompromising authenticity in all aspects of life. This extended to language itself. Early Friends observed that the common English names for days and months were derived from pagan deities and figures: Sunday from the Sun, Monday from the Moon, Tuesday from the Norse god Tyr, Wednesday from Woden, Thursday from Thor, Friday from the goddess Frigg, and Saturday from Saturn.

Similarly, the month names carried associations early Friends found troubling: January from Janus, March from Mars, June from Juno, and so on. To use these names, they reasoned, was to implicitly honor false gods — a form of dishonesty incompatible with their spiritual integrity. In response, Friends began referring to days and months simply by number: First Day, Second Day, Third Day, and so forth for the days of the week; First Month, Second Month, Third Month, and so on through the year.

The Old Style and New Style Calendar Complication

A further complication arose from the transition between the Julian and Gregorian calendars. England continued using the Julian calendar (Old Style) well into the eighteenth century, finally adopting the Gregorian calendar (New Style) in 1752 with the Calendar (New Style) Act of 1750. Under the Old Style calendar still in use during the seventeenth century, the new year began on March 25 — Lady Day — rather than January 1. This means that what we would call January, February, and early March of a given year fell, in Old Style reckoning, at the end of the previous year.

Quakers, using their numbered months, counted from the new year as it was then observed. Thus, what we today call March was their First Month, April was Second Month, May was Third Month, and so

on through the calendar. December, under this system, fell in the tenth position — a fact reflected in the very origin of the word December from the Latin *decem*, meaning ten. January became Eleventh Month and February became Twelfth Month in this Old Style Quaker reckoning.

After 1752, when England adopted the Gregorian calendar and January 1 became the official new year, Quakers gradually adjusted their numbering so that First Month corresponded to January, Second Month to February, and so on. Researchers working with historical Quaker documents must pay careful attention to dates to determine which system is in use, as the shift was not uniform or instantaneous across all meetings.

The Quaker Week: First Day through Seventh Day

The days of the week in the Quaker system ran from First Day (Sunday) through Seventh Day (Saturday). Meeting for Worship was typically held on First Day — what the broader Christian world called the Lord's Day or Sunday — as well as on Fourth Day (Wednesday) in many meetings. Meeting for Business, where Friends gathered to conduct the affairs of the meeting community, was often held monthly, giving rise to the term Monthly Meeting, one of the foundational organizational units of Quaker governance.

In Quaker meeting minutes and correspondence, dates were rendered in a distinctive format. A typical date might appear as '4th of 5th mo. 1682,' meaning the fourth day of Fifth Month (July under Old Style reckoning, May under New Style) in the year 1682. Genealogists and historians working with Quaker records must develop fluency in translating these dates accurately.

Persistence and Decline

The Quaker numbered calendar persisted robustly through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. Among more conservative branches of Friends, particularly the Orthodox and Conservative Friends who separated from more liberal branches in the schisms of 1827-1828 and later, the plain language of numbered days and months remained in use much longer. Some Conservative meetings, such as those in Iowa and Ohio, continued using numbered months into the twentieth century and a small number of Friends maintain this practice today.

Among more liberal branches, including what became the Friends General Conference tradition, the numbered calendar largely fell out of everyday use during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as broader societal integration increased and the specific theological objections to pagan names became less pressing to many Friends. The practice became, for many, a historical curiosity or a point of occasional reflection rather than a living spiritual discipline.

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

The Quaker calendar remains a window into the broader commitment of early Friends to what they called Testimonies — those lived principles of Truth, Equality, Simplicity, Peace, and Community that shaped every aspect of Friends' lives. The calendar was not an isolated quirk but an expression of a coherent worldview in which language itself was a spiritual practice. Historians studying early American Quakerism, which was concentrated heavily in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and the Carolina backcountry, encounter the numbered calendar constantly in vital records, meeting minutes, wills, and personal correspondence.

For those working with digitized Quaker archives — including the records increasingly available through organizations like the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College, Haverford College's Quaker and Special Collections, and the Library of the Religious Society of Friends in London — understanding the calendar system is foundational. Search indexes built on these materials must be capable of handling date variations, translating between Old Style and New Style reckoning, and parsing the characteristic numbered-month format to return accurate results to researchers.

Quick Reference: Month Equivalents

For researchers needing a quick reference, the following correspondences apply under the New Style calendar (post-1752): First Month = January, Second Month = February, Third Month = March, Fourth Month = April, Fifth Month = May, Sixth Month = June, Seventh Month = July, Eighth Month = August, Ninth Month = September, Tenth Month = October, Eleventh Month = November, Twelfth Month = December. Under the Old Style calendar (pre-1752), First Month = March, Second Month = April, Third Month = May, Fourth Month = June, Fifth Month = July, Sixth Month = August, Seventh Month = September, Eighth Month = October, Ninth Month = November, Tenth Month = December, Eleventh Month = January, and Twelfth Month = February.