
John Henris

University of Akron
Abstract

This paper examines the participation of members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in an emergent national agricultural reform movement prior to the American Civil War. This paper focuses on the agricultural writings of Louis Taber, a recorded minister and teacher at the Friends Boarding School in Mt. Peasant, Ohio during the 1840s and early 1850s. Between 1848 and 1853 Taber regularly participated in an emergent national public discourse concerning agricultural improvement through the medium of the *Ohio Cultivator*. Following the Gurneyite-Wilburite schism of the Ohio Yearly Meeting in 1854 Taber only wrote for the agricultural press on a handful of occasions over the next three decades. This paper explores the connections between religion and information by elucidating how Taber’s participation in antebellum agricultural reform reflected his own ideological struggles in siding with the Wilburite faction of the Short Creek Monthly Meeting in 1854.

In April of 1883 Louis Taber, a Wilburite Quaker and recorded minister from Mount Pleasant, Ohio penned an article for the *Ohio Farmer* entitled “Tree Planting on Public Roads.” In this article Taber described himself as an “aged and indifferent farmer…who has seen the snows of seventy-five winters, twenty-five of them in New England,” He went on to write a scathing indictment of programs to plant trees along Ohio’s public roadways (Taber, 1883). The significance of this particular article was not Taber’s rebuke of the shade tree program for Ohio roads, or that it was Taber’s last communication with the agricultural press before his death in December of 1887 (“The Friend,” 1888), but that it was his first significant contribution to the agricultural press since June of 1861 (Taber, 1861b). Taber decried such aesthetic improvement on the grounds that it infringed upon the public good and that tree planted in such a way lacked any real utility. Taber’s emphasis on utility and public good over aesthetic appeared in keeping with Wilburite traditions, however, his articulating them in an Ohio agricultural journal cut across other Wilburite teachings by which Quakers separated themselves from worldly interactions and reform movements.

Louis Taber’s initial interactions with antebellum agricultural reform through his contributions to the *Ohio Cultivator* and his subsequent two decade silence after June of 1861 suggest that the Gurneyite-Wilburite schism of 1847 – 1854 shaped the way Wilburite Quakers interacted with larger trends in sharing information about scientific agriculture prior to the American Civil War. One of several conflicts resulting in this schism regarded Quaker participation in larger national discourses comprising a number
of reform movements of the antebellum period (Hamm, 1992, pp. 30 – 31). Wilburite followers, for example, disliked slavery but contended that proactive participation in anti-slavery societies or the abolitionist press broke down traditional barriers between Quakers and the outside world while leading individuals from the key activity of cultivating a personal relationship with God. Wilburites voiced similar objections over participation in other reform movements in education or the improving of living conditions on Native American reservations. As Quaker historian Thomas Hamm has pointed out in his formative work, *The Transformation of American Quakerism*, the Wilburite objection to participation in antebellum reform was predicated upon the idea that “such associations inevitably drew Friends into the spirit of the World (Hamm, 1992, pp. 31). Louis Taber’s experience as both an agricultural reformer and member of the emergent faction of the Wilburite branch of the Religious Society of Friends in 1854 speaks to these significant transformations of the Religious Society of Friends during the antebellum period.

**Louis Taber: Teacher, Agricultural Reformer, and Wilburite**

Louis Taber was born in Vermont to Quaker parents in 1811. Benjamin and Phebe Taber were members of Starksboro Monthly Meeting of the Peru Quarterly Meeting under the overall supervision of the New York Yearly Meeting. Louis’ father Benjamin Taber was a respected Addison County physician and owned a 200-acre estate called Maple Grove in Lincoln Township, a few miles south of Starkboro Monthly Meeting. It was seasonal work on the expansive meadows and in the sugar orchard of his father’s farm, in the shadow of some of the loftiest elevations of the spine of Vermont’s Green
Mountains, that Louis Taber cultivated a lifelong appreciation for agriculture and rural landscape aesthetic (Taber, R., 1892, pp. 5-10).

At age 15 Louis Taber began teaching school and took a position at the Friends boarding school in Providence, Rhode Island during the 1830s. In 1837 Taber took ill and was forced to give up his teaching position. Taber returned to Maple Grove farm in Lincoln Township, Vermont where he slowly recovered over the next two summers. In 1840, having finally regained his health, Taber traveled to west to see his brother John and decided to take a teaching position at the Mount Pleasant, Ohio Friends Boarding School in the Southeastern part of the state in a small but important Quaker community only fifteen miles from the Virginia borderer (Taber, R., 1892, pp. 19-29, 60, 67).

When Taber arrived in Ohio and transferred his membership to Short Creek Monthly Meeting in 1841 (Hinshaw, (1936) pp. 286) Mount Pleasant had been a center of Midwestern Quakerism for the last four decades. Established in 1800 by the wholesale removal of the entire Trent Monthly Meeting of North Carolina to the Short Creek region, the townships surrounding Mount Pleasant attracted Southern Quakers who were trying to leave states where slavery was permitted. Northern Quakers searching for new land found the region around Mt. Pleasant equally amenable (Burk, James and Bensch, Donald, 1974, pp. 228-229). By the time of Taber’s arrival in 1841 Mount Pleasant hosted the Ohio Yearly Meeting while the townships bordering the intersecting counties of Jefferson, Belmont, and Harrison were predominantly settled by members of a number of Orthodox Quaker monthly meetings along with small contingents of Hicksite separatists. Within this Quaker heartland in southeastern Ohio, Louis Taber began
teaching at the Friends boarding school, married Rachel Hill, and purchased a small farm just north of the village of Mount Pleasant (Hinshaw, (1936) pp. 286).

Taber’s farm appears to have been typical for Southeastern Ohio prior to the American Civil War in that it depending upon wool production for most of its economic exchange. By the U.S. agricultural census returns for 1850, for example, Louis Taber’s farm consisted of 74 acres and was valued at 3,000 dollars. In 1849 he kept 2 horses, 3 milk cows, and 50 sheep. On his till and meadow Taber produced 140 bushels of wheat, 350 bushels of corn and 6 tons of hay (U.S. Non-Population Agricultural Census Returns, 1850). The census returns for 1850 only credited Taber with twenty dollars from the sale of “products of the orchard.” The fall of 1849 must have been a poor fruit year as Tabor himself wrote in 1861 that his orchard consisted of 100 apple trees forty to sixty years in age that averaged 100 barrels of fruit annually (Taber, 1861a). It is worth noting that Taber wrote in 1858 about preserving maple trees for the production of sugar but produced no maple sugar on his farm in 1850. Taber’s experience on this Mount Pleasant farm, however, undoubtedly provided the experiences he recounted in his articles for the Ohio Cultivator between 1848 and 1861.

On 15 April 1848 Louis Taber entered the larger national discussion on agricultural improvement by contributing and article on the renovation of ailing apple trees entitled “Old Orchards” for the Ohio Cultivator (Taber, 1848). Between 1848 and 1861 at least twenty-seven articles in the Ohio Cultivator on such diverse topics as the seasonal agriculture outlook, scientific agriculture, or agricultural improvement can be positively attributed to Louis Taber. Taber’s writings could be divided into two distinct periods. The majority of his work for the Ohio Cultivator, twenty-one articles, was
contributed between 1848 and 1853. After a five-year hiatus, Taber wrote another six articles for the *Ohio Cultivator* between 1858 and 1861. After 1861 Taber would not contribute another work, specifically on agricultural improvement, for the agricultural press until he published his final article, “Tree Planting Along Public Roads” for the *Ohio Farmer* in April of 1883 (Taber, 1883).

Certain themes predominated in Taber’s contributions to the *Ohio Cultivator* between 1848 and 1861. In the realm of agricultural improvement Taber was most interested in horticulture (Taber, 1848), honeybees (Taber, 1850b), and fencing, (Taber, 1853). Recognizing the value in improving rural society more generally, Taber also wrote extensively of the importance of funding for public roads (Taber, 1848b) and the passing of legislation for the protection of farmers’ crops and livestock from threats such as dogs (Taber, 1850a) or fraud committed by itinerate fruit tree peddlers (Taber 1858a).

Measuring the value of Taber’s contributions to the larger discourse of antebellum agricultural improvement is difficult at best. His writings shine most in his commitment to local legislation for the protection of farmers’ property or the funding of public roads, however, Taber’s articulation of an emerging conservation consciousness is most compelling. Richard Judd, for example, has argued that farmers’ efforts to manage soil exhaustion and diminishing yields in the nineteenth century provided the foundations for the conservation movement of the first decades of the twentieth century (Judd, 1997). In this context, Taber’s discussion on the management of meadow and pasture for honeybee production (Taber, 1850b) or his call for the protection of maple trees for the sustainable production of sugar (Taber 1858b) seem particularly important. Taber, however, may not have anticipated a twentieth-century conservation ethic but, in true Wilburite fashion,
was looking backward to what historian Donald Kelley described as a “distinctive eighteenth century Quaker ecological attitude toward nature encapsulating benevolence to all living things and custodianship to God in the conservation of land” (Kelly, 1985, pp 250).

As an antebellum practitioner of scientific agricultural reform, however, Taber’s contributions to the *Ohio Cultivator* were often called into question. In March and April of 1850, for example, Taber inadvertently invited criticism from other farmers after writing an article about the value of water witching (Taber, 1850), a practice almost universally derided by the progressive agricultural community. A more common error attributed to Taber’s contribution to the agricultural press was his seeming inability to see past the superficial similarities in land, community, and agriculture between Lincoln, Vermont and Mount Pleasant, Ohio.

The agriculture of both townships revolved extensively around wool husbandry. Similarly, outside stream valleys such as Short Creek in Mount Pleasant, Ohio or Lewis Creek in Lincoln Township, Vermont, soils were relatively thin and farmers in both communities faced limitations in the long-term management of agricultural resources in the decades prior to the Civil War. Here, however, the similarities ended. In Lincoln Township, for example, winters were much colder and the growing season shorter, while soils were much stonier than in Mt. Pleasant. Despite these differences Tabor wrote several times on the construction of stonewalls for fencing in Ohio (Taber, 1851), a natural endeavor for a Vermont farmer but one that was meant with bemusement from an Ohio readership where stones for such an enterprise were seldom to be found. In another instance, Tabor advocated for the protection of maple trees in southeastern Ohio (Taber,
In Ohio, however, primarily on account of ecological factors maple sugar was only extensively produced in two distance regions from Mount Pleasant Township. Taber, it appeared, had difficulty articulating a message of agricultural reform for southeastern Ohio yet quietly espoused a particularly Quaker conservation ethic dating back at least to the eighteenth century.

**Quakers, Botany, & Agricultural Reform**

Prior to the fracturing of American Quakerism into Hicksite and Orthodox branches in 1828 the Religious Society of Friends had a long tradition and shared history of botanical exploration, agricultural experimentation, and conservation consciousness in the Americas. William Penn, founder of the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania in 1681, for example, imported seeds and grafts from Europe into the new colony while engaging in extensive horticultural activities in the gardens of his Pennsbury Manor (Hunt 1953). For early American Quakers agricultural improvement became a metaphor for the early colonial experience. As Erin Bell has pointed out in discussion of American Friend John Woolman, “seventeenth-century Friends going to the New World … needed to prepare for both literal and spiritual husbandry” (Bell, 2006, pp. 159). John Bartram, A Quaker farmer from Darby, Pennsylvania, came to prominence during the eighteenth century as a botanist, explorer, and author. Bartram conversed regularly with European botanists, created the first botanical garden in the American Colonies, and is generally credited as the founder of American botany. William Bartram, son of John Bartram became a renowned American botanist during the last decades of the eighteen-century (Clarke, 1985). For Quakers such as William Penn, John Bartram, and William Bartram botanical exploration and agricultural experimentation fit comfortable with the ideological tenets of
eighteenth-century American Quakerism that associated physical agricultural cultivation with the cultivation of the spirit.

During the first half of the nineteenth century a number of American Quakers were among the most regular and prolific contributors to the emergent agricultural press between 1820 and 1860. Among the Orthodox and Hicksite Quaker communities of the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, for example, Aurora Township farmer David Thomas was one of the most prolific contributors to the agricultural press of the antebellum period. Thomas was credited with contributing 800 articles (Barbour, 1995, pp 240) on such diverse subjects as horticulture, soils, and the moderating influence of the Finger Lakes upon the agriculture of surrounding townships (Thomas, 1842). Thomas’ enthusiasm for scientific agricultural culminated with his push to open the Aurora Agricultural Institute in 1845 the only such organization at least indirectly affiliated with the Religious Society of Friends prior to the American Civil War (Young, 1845).

Among the Midwestern Hicksite and Orthodox Quaker communities surrounding Richmond, Indiana, J.T. Plummer emerged as an equally important contributor to the national discourse on scientific agriculture between 1830 and 1850. Though not as prolific as David Thomas, Plummer wrote regularly about horticulture, plant science, botany, and the best varieties of grasses for pasturage in the Midwest (Inlow, 1960, pp 12). In typical Quaker fashion, Plummer refused positions with local colleges that would have bequeathed a title upon him. Plummer produced a substantive body of work without formal connection to any institution of higher learning. Interestingly, both Thomas and
Plummer were associated with the Hixsite faction of the Religious Society of Friends, a group that separated from the Orthodox community in 1827 and 1828.

The cadence Louis Taber’s contributions to the national discourse on scientific agriculture and rural improvement, though modest in comparison with the work of Quakers such as David Thomas or J.T. Plummer, suggests that Taber made a conscious decision to separate himself from such discussions on ideological grounds during the 1850s. Taber, for example, ended his correspondence with the Ohio Cultivator in 1853, a year before the Wilburite-Gurneyite schism within the Ohio Yearly Meeting. Though Taber managed to publish a handful of articles after 1858 his last article for the Ohio Cultivator was published one month prior to the battle of First Manassas on July 21 1861.

Although Taber’s interaction with the Ohio agricultural press suggests that he abided by Wilburite beliefs concerning participation in reform movements and interaction with the non-Quaker communities, a number of alternative explanations for Taber’s actions exist. First among these was that Taber’s important contributions to an emergent discourse of conservation consciousness went unrecognized by readership of the Ohio Cultivator and Taber was not a particularly good scientific agriculturist. Readers were quick to pounce on his defense of water witching, for example, and there is evidence in the first article he published after a five-year silence in 1858 that Taber had been involved in a falling out with the previous editor of the Ohio Cultivator.

An equally plausible catalyst for Taber’s seeming abandonment of the agricultural press can be found in a series of personal and spiritual tragedies that befell him between 1851 and 1862. In fact the majority of Taber’s work (two thirds of all articles published) with the Ohio Cultivator were publish prior to 1852. In 1852 Taber was absent from his
farm and back in Vermont to see is ailing mother who died in September. In 1853, his
wife Rachel’s mother passed away after a brief illness and the Short Creek Monthly
Meeting (Wilburite) was eventually laid down by the Wilburite-Gurneyite schism of
1854 the following year. Further schisms rattled the Wilburite community in
Southeastern Ohio around 1860 and the Gurneyite faction officially disowned Taber in
1862. For twenty years Taber would remain silent in the Ohio agricultural press, with the
exception of a travel narrative of his last trip to Vermont upon the occasion of his father’s
illness and death in 1866. Taber would only pen one last article for the agricultural press
on shade trees and public roads in 1883, just four years prior to his own death in 1887.

Conclusions

The role of Louis Taber’s emergent Wilburite convictions during the early 1850s
in shaping his participation in writing for the agricultural press remains unclear. The
cadence of Taber’s writing for the Ohio Cultivator between 1848 and 1861 suggests that
he turned away from participation in the national discourse concerning agricultural
improvement as a reform movement on account of religious conviction. However, the
duration end ebb of his publication dates similarly correlate with a number of personal
tragedies between 1851 and 1853. Evidence from excerpts of his diary, published in The
Friend in 1892, strongly suggest that personal tragedy, the long process of dealing with
the growing ideological schism culminating in the breakup of the Ohio Yearly Meeting in
1854 and his official disownment by the Gurneyite faction in 1862 simply exhausted
Taber both spiritually and as an agricultural writer.
While Taber’s motivations for ending his partnership with *Ohio Cultivator* remain inconclusive, evidence suggests that the Gurneyite-Wilburite schism in the Ohio Yearly Meeting of 1854 might well have influenced the way in which Wilburites, such as Louis Taber, approached the sharing of information in a national context and warrants further investigation. One potential avenue for more comprehensively exploring this theme would be to examine the career of Louis Taber’s neighbor Micajah Johnson, a Wilburite Quaker who similarly wrote for the *Ohio Cultivator* during the 1840s, while elucidating the history of the Short Creek Township Agricultural Society in 1846, an organization led by Ezra Cattell and other members of the Wilburite branch of the Religious Society of Friends. Though it is unlikely that even a concerted effort by the Wilburite faction to avoid the agricultural press would have kept new methods of agricultural improvement from diffusing into the community, more work needs to be explored elucidating the role of the Religious Society of Friends in antebellum agricultural reform.
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Biographical Statement:
John Henris completed his Ph.D. in American history in May of 2009 at the University of Akron. He currently teaches at several universities across Northeastern Ohio. His research interests include nineteenth-century agriculture, environment, and rural society.