

A Quaker History of Black Mountain College

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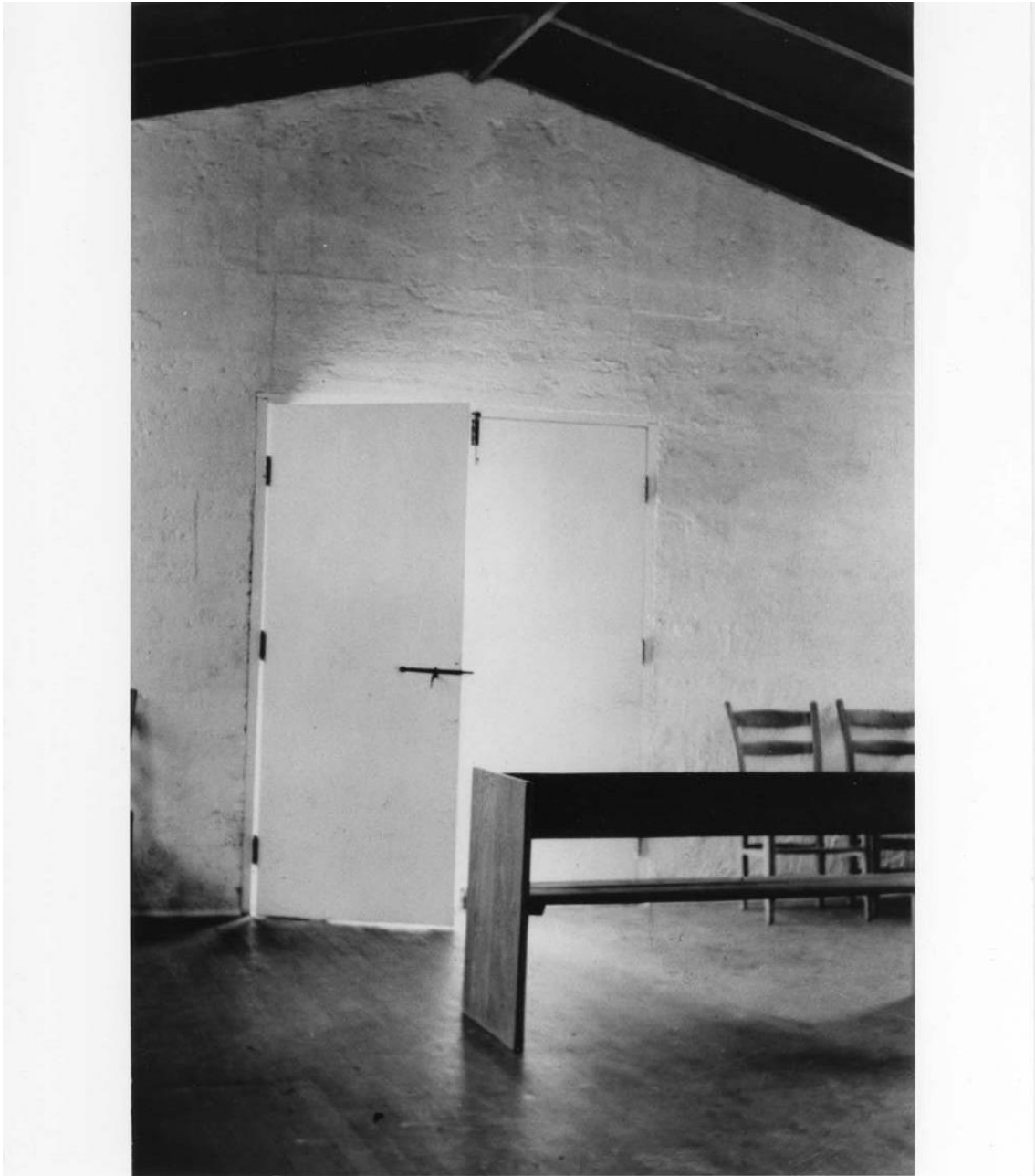
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Quiet House (interior). The pews were carved by Quaker Black Mountaineer Molly Gregory. Accessed and reproduced with permission of the Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Introduction: Reconsidering the Quakers

From creation to closure, Black Mountain College's identity was influenced by Quakers and Quakerism, known formally as the Religious Society of Friends. In Martin Duberman's oft-cited *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (1972), the Quakers of Black Mountain College are portrayed as a quirky clan of puritanical moralists, foils to the fun. Casting the college Quakers as "conventional people...with little interest in experimental education and less tolerance for unorthodox morality"¹ was a pinch of the spice, stereotype. A drab bloc of Edward Hicksian traditionalists made the total story of the college all the more deliciously ironic. Thus, for fifty years, the assessment of the Black Mountain College Quakers being stuffy and obstructive has cemented into the psyche of Black Mountain College Studies, a field built, in large part, upon Duberman's wide-ranging interview transcripts.

At this half-century anniversary, it's time to reconsider Duberman's assertions that, as Duberman admits in the revised 1992 preface to the book, were fashioned from the angsty, anti-institutional "Sixties-shaped values,"² and pronounced by a navigation for identity of the author in the fashion of New Journalism. Astutely, Duberman invites critiques in the reflective final chapter of the book: "Have I done some of the individuals serious injustice?"³ This article is a reflection on that query.

It appears Duberman had an anti-religion affinity when writing the book. "Black Mountain was right, it was a godless community!"⁴ he told Hannelore Hahn while conducting an interview for the book. Duberman was rightly skeptical of the American Christian project because of its distinct and violent homophobia. Duberman survived much hate-fueled backlash from the altar and from academe to his coming out in the book. Further, Duberman was writing the book in New York City in the midst and aftermath of the Stonewall Riots of 1969 (an event he wrote definitive histories about). This article argues, however, that the Quakers, and their participation in Black Mountain College, need to be distinguished from the American Christian status quo of the time.

While Duberman's commentary on the Quakers was certainly influenced by some of his interview subjects, his unquestioning of their assertions voided a richer, more eccentric, supplemental story.⁵ It's comprehensible why many Black Mountaineers whom Duberman interviewed resented the Quaker presence on campus. Despite the

liberal spirit of the school, it was not, on the whole, an anti-violence environment. Many students and faculty participated in military service. After all, in times of financial desperation, the college was subsidized by the G.I. Bill (even to the point of FBI inquiry with the premise of skepticism over the use of government funds at such a suspiciously-liberal school).⁶ Many students traded in their combat boots for the scrappy, handmade leather harnessed sandals that became commonplace on the college campus.⁷ The Quakers, pacifists all, were conscientious objectors and were likely the source of resentment among military veteran Black Mountaineers.⁸

One might speculate that the presence of Quakers on campus was a helpful device for Duberman to dramatize “distress of the avant-garde”⁹ and infuse a flavor of drama in conveying the bizarreness of the misfit-friendly campus. After all, Quakers—a minoritarian denomination with a moral mandate for modesty and quietness—have regularly been conjured in media representations to signify the American “antimodern, pre-modern, and unurban”¹⁰ condition. What writer of Black Mountain College wouldn’t indulge the bull of personality, the professor of Projective Verse, Charles Olson over the quiet Quaker drama teacher and school treasurer, Wes Huss?

Duberman dealt with Quakers in scholarship throughout his career. In an article titled “Male Impotence in Colonial Pennsylvania,” Duberman published archival material that related to the colonial Quaker culture of the state.¹¹ In his 1963 documentary-theater play *In White America*, Duberman theatricalized the voices of Quaker abolitionists from diaries and archival documents. Paul Robeson, the titular subject of a 1989 biography by Duberman, was born into a prominent Black Quaker family on his mother’s side.¹²

Duberman’s characterization of Quaker hostility toward the creative arts wasn’t false per se—it was outdated. Indeed, early Quakers were distrustful of the arts because, as the German Quaker artist and Pratt Institute educator Fritz Eichenberg asserted in 1952, Christian iconography had become representative of a church system that disguised its corruption in imagery that elicited fear and awe.¹³ Duberman’s mistake, however, was in forgoing a consideration of a changing Quaker character. In 1933, the same year Black Mountain College was founded, Rufus Jones, a Quaker

professor at the nation's oldest Quaker College, Haverford, delivered the following commencement remarks:

We look back with mild pity on the generations of Haverford students who were deprived of the joy of music and art. The strong anti-aesthetic bias in the minds of the Quaker founders and early managers was, I think, an unmitigated disaster.¹⁴

On the Black Mountain College Quakers, Duberman missed an opportunity to reveal a dimension of school's distinctiveness. At Black Mountain, a new profile for the American Quaker character of the twentieth century was applied. The Quakers at Black Mountain weren't the foils to the fun, they were keeping the rogue pirate party ship of a school afloat. When others wanted to dock the ship, the Black Mountain College Quakers were the ones saying: not yet, one more, we believe.¹⁵

On the Need for This Article

Why is the ensuing correction important? Because the role of stereotypically-traditional Quakers in the iconically-modern Black Mountain College recalibrate our assumptions about the character of innovative learning and the potential allies of the cause. This article offers the profile of a quieter disposition of the stereotypically boisterous Black Mountaineer.

But why does accounting for the Quakers matter? Is a similar consideration needed for the Black Mountain College Catholics, Unitarians, or Buddhists? First, as alum Trueman Machenry reflected, Quakers "were the only group there [on campus] in my time who represented a religious sect and I think this fact was not without consequence."¹⁶ The presence of an organized religious coalition innately created conflict on campus. As Harvey Littleton, founder of the American Studio Glass Movement, noted: "You see, that was the savior of Black Mountain in the later days, the Quakers, but at the same time it created factions that helped to destroy the school, the total school."¹⁷

Besides German Jewish refugees and Jewish students,¹⁸ there was virtually no coordinated religious or denominational identification at the fiercely agnostic—if not atheistic—Black Mountain College, with the exception of the Friends.

Second, what makes the Quakers notable is the denomination's righteous emphasis on putting beliefs into actions or non-actions. While certainly most—if not all—religious practices emphasize the synchronization between dogma and application, the Quaker method sanctifies radicality, hence the denomination's tolerance for activist stances in the United States particularly relating to race relations, the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, and the ceasing of war, violence, and the death penalty.

Quakerism has been influencing the development of the United States since its founding. George Washington noted the useful synchronicity between the Quaker philosophy and practice (while, of course, bemoaning their non-military stance) in 1789:

Your principles and conduct are well known to me; and it is doing the people called Quakers no more than justice to say, that (except for their declining to share with others the burden of common defense) there is no denomination among us, who are more exemplary and useful citizens.¹⁹

The “exemplary” ‘usefulness’ of Quakers has been leveraged for American operations since the colonization of the country. Insofar, as Americanists would argue, that Black Mountain College was a distinctly American venture, it is notable that a considerable number of Quakers were involved. Such ‘usefulness,’ this article will outline, was consciously activated by Black Mountain College, which defined the American avant-garde of the twentieth century. The non-Quaker leaders of the school named Quaker usefulness as a benefit to the operation. The Quaker educators associated their activities at Black Mountain College with their faithful practice and testimony.

On Finding My Way to This Topic

My consideration of Quakerism at Black Mountain College is not a product of denominational bias. I am not a Quaker and, thus, have no agenda or denominational inferiority complex to write out. For what it's worth, I opted into the American Baptist denomination (juxtapositional from the Southern Baptist Convention, for those for whom the word “Baptist” is an academic speed-bump) after a righteously non-sectarian Boston undergraduate education. I found my way into Black Mountain College Studies while I was a graduate student at The University of Alabama studying Theater.

I was magnetized to Alabama as a greenhorn regionalist, captivated by the aesthetics of the Dallas Nine movement of the 1930s and the philosophies of the regional theater movement of the 1960s, which I wrote about often. I found a hospitable chapel of academic proactivity in the university's boutique department of interdisciplinary Religious Studies. Under their mentorship, I published my first article on Black Mountain College's Stage Studies program designed by Bauhausler Xanti Schawinsky.²⁰

I continued my research on Black Mountain College at New York University where I got my second graduate degree in interdisciplinary studies while teaching Theater at a Quaker boarding school, Westtown. By the time I went on a prolonged research trip to the Western Regional North Carolina State Archives, the W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection at Appalachian State University, along with the Special Collections at Western Carolina University and Swarthmore College, my academic phoropter focused on a query regarding the Quakers. With a slight amount of archival investigation, a history of American Quakerism and Black Mountain College tumbled out, ready to be told.²¹

The archival research in this article is adapted from a chapter in my thesis, which was defended in the Fall semester of 2021. In my thesis, "Avant-Folk Ways of Seeing Black Mountain College in Total Identity," I apply a series of lenses on the history of Black Mountain College to consider how much pastness there is in newness, a concept I articulate by repurposing the phrase "avant-folk." In the spirit of New Southern Studies and psychogeography, an avant-folk analysis of Black Mountain College considers how regional factors and traditions contributed to the college's innovative output.

Quakerism is the oldest Christian denomination in North Carolina, with the state being "virtually a Quaker province" in the late 1600s.²² In the late 1800s, Quakers were commissioned by Ulysses Grant to operate boarding schools to indoctrinate Cherokee children into colonial religion and assimilation.²³ Quakers were contracted by the federal government to operate a Civilian Public Service camp in Buck Creek, North Carolina—two hours away from the college's campus.²⁴ Thus, by infusing Quakerism into the operations and pedagogy, Black Mountain College was participating in and perpetuating a colonial religious tradition distinct to its region. Although the denomination was

“traditional” to the state, the applied theology of Quaker teachers informed Black Mountain College’s contemporariness.

Today, local Quakers in Asheville and Black Mountain are generally gobsmacked by the revelation that Black Mountain College was Quakerly. In my summer 2021 visits to the Asheville Friends Meeting and Swannanoa Valley Friends Meeting, Friends (most of whom were retirees non-native to the region) expressed joyful surprise at the supposition. Thus, this article not only aims to correct the academic narrative but to also connect a local religious community to its legacy of participation in the school that defined the American avant-garde.

While this article will endeavor to engage archival research to provide a more complete accounting for the role of Quakers and Quakerism in Black Mountain College, juxtaposed against the narrative set forth by Duberman, I will not make audacious speculative leaps. For example, while a compelling assessment could be made considering the relationship between John Cage’s spirit of Zen Buddhism²⁵ and Quakerism’s famously silent method of worship—and whether such connections were encouraged on the Black Mountain campus—such assertions must be proven in future pieces. Instead, here is an inventory of the college’s Quaker connections and a correction to the story of the school.

The Presidential Porch of Swarthmore College

One might reasonably assume Black Mountain College (BMC) was conceptualized at Rollins College when BMC founder John Rice was fired by Rollins president, Herbie Holt in their infamous clash of egos.²⁶ However, after his termination, Rice retreated to Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. There, he stayed with his Oxford friend and brother-in-law Frank Aydelotte, the well-regarded president of the intensely-Quaker Swarthmore College.²⁷ Aydelotte was the first president of the college who wasn’t a birthright Quaker, although he became a convinced Friend after his tenure at Swarthmore, as a means of demonstrating sincerity to the belief system outside of the scope of his position.²⁸ Educational history regards Aydelotte as a shepherd of liberal learning and the architect of Swarthmore’s now-well-known academic competitiveness.²⁹

Although Aydelotte was the one who recommended Rice for the Rollins gig,³⁰ by 1933, he was advising the dissenter to start a new school and bring his acolytes along. “Other members of the faculty rebelled and either resigned or were dismissed from Rollins,” Aydelotte wrote in a letter, explaining his role in the founding of Black Mountain College. “We took as many of them into our house as we had room for and when the house was full, I arranged rooms for them in the Swarthmore dormitories. They sat down on our front porch and worked out the plan for the college which afterward became Black Mountain.”³¹ Aydelotte’s presidential mansion at Swarthmore “has long been noted for the gracious hospitality with which one is received there,”³² the Westtown student newspaper reported in 1939. Aydelotte’s hospitality made Swarthmore, the nation’s most prestigious Quaker college, an incubator of innovative American education.



The presidential mansion of Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. On the porch pictured is where dissenting Rollins College professors, led by John Rice, conceptualized Black Mountain College. Photo by Alex Ates, 25 Oct. 2021.

The Quaker Modus Operandi

In Black Mountain College's founding year, Aydelotte encouraged Rice to:

[G]o somewhat slowly about making bylaws. I have a deep-seated prejudice against constitutions, bylaws, and all other hampering restrictions on the freedom of creative effort...I myself am always inclined to think that a government of men [sic] is better than a government of laws if you can find the right men.³³

Thus, Black Mountain College was governed by students and faculty through a meeting structure explicitly modeled after the Quaker process of sensing consensus—or—intuiting “a sense of the meeting.”³⁴ Many scholars have noted the similarity between the school's general governing meetings and the Quaker meeting style, but few dig in deeper to explore the Quaker equation of BMC. It is likely that Rice referenced the Quakerly style of Swarthmore meetings in his conceptualizing of BMC's democratic structure: not only was his brother-in-law the president but his daughter, Mary attended the Swarthmore while Rice was rector of Black Mountain College.

Quaker mysticism was the method for addressing the many periods of conflict and tumult in the college's operations and it was embraced not only by Rice. As poet, potter, and Black Mountaineer M.C. Richards noted: “Anni Albers always urged that when conflict arose between two positions, we continue to work together to discover a third! It was similar to the Quaker approach of no decision without unanimity.”³⁵ Albers became “quite interested in the Quakers,” said Black Mountaineer Molly Gregory in a 1971 interview, “and [Albers] went and looked up quite a lot of them.”³⁶

Anni Albers' connection to Quakerism extended into her family; her sister Lotte Maria Fleischmann Benfey and brother-in-law Eduard Benfey evacuated to North Carolina from Nazi Germany thanks to Josef and Anni's employment at BMC. Anni Albers' nephew, Otto Theodor “Ted” Benfey, became a Quaker and taught Chemistry at Quaker colleges such as Haverford, Earlham, and Guilford in Greensboro, North Carolina. Ted Benfey's son, the writer and professor, Christopher Benfey, outlines the Quaker roots of his family and their connection to BMC in his informative, free-flowing 2012 memoir *Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay*.

But, back to Swarthmore. In its founding days, correspondences that pitched Black Mountain College to potential professors, benefactors, and students were channeled through the Quaker college. Aydelotte's support of the college included recruiting visionary professors for Black Mountain College,³⁷ donating regularly to the school, and being a steady source of encouragement for the enterprise. When asked to serve on the college's board of advisors, Aydelotte wrote in a 1940 telegram: "[I] always felt my unofficial connection to Black Mountain College unique and much more effective than any formal relationship."³⁸ The relationship between Aydelotte and BMC was put to the test on a few major occasions.

Aydelotte's Involvement in the Final Years

In 1954, Aydelotte's sister, Nell Rice, BMC's longtime librarian found herself ostracized from rector Charles Olson and Quaker treasurer Wes Huss. In a letter to Nell, Aydelotte bemoaned that "the group in power would throw away all the fine tradition built up at Black Mountain as a college."³⁹ Aydelotte complained "that the place has become more and more a resort for artists and poets...[and] has neither money nor students,"⁴⁰ and told Olson that the school was "violently un-academic"⁴¹—which it was; under Olson and Huss, the school was short in number and tall in problems. Black Mountain was a dilapidated dive bar of a college.

In 1955, in the face of a pending lawsuit from former faculty members regarding contingent salaries (organized by Nell),⁴² Aydelotte was brokering deals to sell portions of the campus to add some funds to the school's kitty. Brokering a sale led Aydelotte to correspond with Black Mountain village physician Howard Hilley, associated with the now-defunct Southeastern Christian Assembly. Hilley wanted to use the college campus to start a new university that would subsume Black Mountain College: "Ford University" would be akin to Duke or Wake Forest.⁴³ In a letter to Henry Allen Moe, administrator of the Guggenheim Fund, Aydelotte outlined the plan he and Hilley concocted:

We are now rather thinking that this is a question of establishing a new college or university in which Black Mountain might have a place but which would really be O.K. even if Black Mountain did not come in. I think we both feel that the present little group of faculty at Black Mountain would not be enthusiastic about the kind

of institution Hilley and I would like to see. On the other hand, they have no money and are not really in a position to stand out against it unless they can sell some of their land for enough to keep them going for a while.⁴⁴

At times Hilley—an evangelical Christian—got cold feet, such as when Nell Rice informed him of some of the college’s environment: “Your sister told me that a case of adultery had developed in the college and a case of homosexuality also... Also, your sister indicated that there had been some talk of using the press of Black Mountain College to publish the paper of the Anarchists of America.”⁴⁵ Aydelotte responded to Hilley with “there is no question that Black Mountain College needs cleaning up and no question also that any kind of future for the college depends on some such plan as you outline.”⁴⁶ While Aydelotte did not directly participate in Hilley’s homophobia, he condoned the premise of Hilley’s concerns: Black Mountain College was too impulsive.

Aydelotte’s frustration with Olson and Huss’ Black Mountain College led to him and Nell Rice secretly working to sell the school, outside of the faculty’s awareness. Since the college started at Aydelotte’s presidential porch, Aydelotte likely felt empowered in his efforts to save (or sacrifice) the college, as a sort of godfather of the enterprise. However, upon heightening pressure, Olson cut ties between the two after a fiery postal tête-à-tête:

We are trying to keep it [the college] alive, make it live. And you dangle help in front of us at the same time you now say in so many words that it has a price on it, your kind of price...It is too petty and personal, Dr. Aydelotte, if it isn’t more, before a large and serious fact: that Black Mountain College (which was founded on your porch, like they say) will either go down without your help or continue because it wouldn’t buy your help. I regret very much that you or your sister has led us to believe for such a long time that you really wanted to help Black Mountain College. It was a misunderstanding which has led us to look to you for help altogether too long. We are glad that it is now finally clear. And that it is over.⁴⁷

Aydelotte responded to the letter: “I feel just as friendly to Black Mountain as I ever have and should gladly help the college in any way possible.”⁴⁸

Before having ties completely severed in 1955 when Nell left her post as librarian, Aydelotte's informal relationship with the college was often put to the test, such as when John Rice was ousted from the college in 1939 for cheating on Nell in an affair with a student. Aydelotte's loyalty to Black Mountain was further tested in 1949 when Dreier, Anni Albers, rector of the school Josef Albers, and two other faculty members resigned en masse after a faction of the school petitioned for college co-founder Theodore Dreier's resignation as treasurer. It was in this crisis Aydelotte coordinated with Quakers from Swarthmore and Pendle Hill to keep BMC afloat.

The Quaker Crisis Managers

Ray Trayer, a Quaker faculty member who managed BMC's farm, was placed as interim rector of the school, or, as he put it, "in charge of the crisis"⁴⁹ in 1949. Now put at the helm of a crisis with the college's core faculty collapsing, Trayer dispatched Aydelotte for help.⁵⁰

Aydelotte deployed Swarthmore's retired controller, "Pitt" (Nicholas "N.O." Pittenger, an Indiana-to-Pennsylvania Quaker whose namesake is now affixed to a Swarthmore dorm) to bring "order and decency to the college." Pitt was sent to North Carolina with a squad of recently-graduated Swarthmoreans and retired professors recruited by Aydelotte⁵¹ to "strengthen [Pitt's] hand."⁵² As Aydelotte wrote to Pitt, "I still wish we could get one of the Quakers from Pendle Hill or the American Friends Service Committee"⁵³ to stock the staff. Aydelotte wrote that Quakers "would be the salvation of Black Mountain."⁵⁴

Talk of "salvation" and "decency" sounds overtly puritanical. However, it's worth noting that such correspondence was not the source of Duberman's assessment of the Quakers. Further, now is a chance to check any Black Mountain romanticism that might be creeping in. It's not emphasized enough in *Black Mountain College Studies*: For the most part, the college was an unapologetically hard, unfriendly, tense, and dysfunctional place. Many students transferred. There was a disproportionate amount of rifts, fights, sabotages, suicides, and sexual assaults at the tiny school. While Aydelotte might sound prudish, posterity has been kind to him: He's credited for liberalizing and legitimizing Swarthmore; Rice and Olson are considered, in the eyes of history, rather

questionable characters (i.e., Rice's cranky, egocentric autobiography [*I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century*] and Tom Clark's biography on Olson [*Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life*], highlighting Olson's destructive disposition).

During existential crises, a flock of Quakers often rescued the school from financial and philosophical collapse to the point where chaperones of Black Mountain College institution were conditioned to commission Quakers in times of tumult. Such as when Theodore Dreier wrote in a telegram during an "unexpected [financial] crossroads"⁵⁵ for the school he would "consult local Quakers here."⁵⁶ Or when the Quaker drama teacher Wes Huss, the school's final treasurer, tried to keep the college open alongside Olson.⁵⁷

Huss, who aimed to keep the college alive—despite the school being on financial life support in its sunset years under the distracted apathy of Olson—was a longtime member of and administrator with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organization dedicated to global humanitarianism.⁵⁸ AFSC was a persistently parallel organization to BMC. In 1944, AFSC was engaged to determine qualified refugee professors at the college.⁵⁹ In 1948, after the BMC Science building burned down, AFSC's work camp—a program designed for curated community service for young contentious objectors—offered to help rebuild the facility. Trayer responded to the message with enthusiasm: "The prospects of a Friends Work camp here this summer is indeed highly desirable."⁶⁰ Ultimately, the AFSC decided against it:

It was felt that, with the few camps that we would be able to sponsor among the great number of requests that we have had, we should work with indigenous community groups primarily, especially those who had few outside contacts were carrying on pretty much by themselves. This certainly does not reflect any lack of interest in the school on our part[.]⁶¹

AFSC engaged again in the business of Black Mountain when Aydelotte reached out in 1954 to see if the organization could donate any funds to the survival of the college. In response, Charles Pickett, Executive Secretary of AFSC, wrote:

I think it is possible that in the fall, when our funds have been built up again, we might raise the question of a small contribution of a few thousand dollars. We

infer from your letter that it would take quite sizable amounts to rescue Black Mountain. I am sorry we have not been able to do more for Black Mountain.⁶²

Indeed, if it's not clear—the American Friends Service Committee cared for Black Mountain College. Once again, Quakers were sought when Black Mountain was at rock bottom.

The AFSC supported Black Mountain College in indirect ways, such as through their National Japanese American Student Relocation Council which supported Ruth Asawa's training in art education and her travels to a Service Committee work camp in Mexico where she observed woven wire baskets, a medium she'd famously-enhance through her studies at Black Mountain College.⁶³

But Swarthmore was not the only pipe between Quaker education at Black Mountain.⁶⁴ Trayer was initially associated with the college when his wife Dottie Trayer applied as a student after her studies at the Quaker education center Pendle Hill, where she had been “well acquainted with community living and sharing of work.”⁶⁵ Established in the town next to Swarthmore,⁶⁶ Pendle Hill opened in 1930 as “an institution of religious and social purpose where students might seek solutions to the problems of the world around them, and most particularly to those of modern Quakerism.”⁶⁷ Like BMC, Pendle Hill had a pedagogy spurred by anti-institutionalism. As Pendle Hill's founding director, Henry Hodgkin proclaimed, their school was:

An educational experiment in which the degree-getting motive will be eliminated while work of the highest grade will be expected. It calls for the best possible use of the human mind and at the same time a reverent recognition of the world that lies beyond our logical systems and opens only to the child-like wonder and appreciation of the sincere and humble seeker.⁶⁸

Pendle Hill's first class of students, an international and racially-integrated cohort, took courses in applied Christianity, philosophy, and psychology.⁶⁹ Three years later in 1933 (the same year BMC was founded), Pendle Hill began publishing pamphlets on religion, society, and non-violence.⁷⁰ The mission of printing pamphlets led to the creation of a campus printing press, and the evolution of an arts-based curriculum at Pendle Hill that eventually included ceramics.

John McCandless, who was a printmaking student at Pendle Hill, was hired by Black Mountain College to be their press shop superintendent and professor of printing. In his application to work at Black Mountain, McCandless wrote that he inclined: “toward Quakerism and anarchism.”⁷¹ From McCandless’ inclination, one can intuit the mood of the Pendle Hill campus and its applied Quakerism.

Robert Chapin Turner, a Swarthmore alum who taught at Black Mountain College from 1949-1951, set up the school’s first ceramics studio, having the school’s pot shop custom built.⁷² Turner was overt in how Quakerism influenced his art-making:

I think the Quakerism I know is—well, you could say, there is no box you're in. It's open and evolving. What we learn is evolving. It's not something set. And that kind of openness is very important to me, certainly as an artist and as a person. And I think that has been central, really, to my work in art, that sense of openness, the sense of the value of each person, the value of individuals, and also the value of what I picked up from Africa, particularly, the value of trees, of everything around us.⁷³

Turner’s teaching in ceramics were a ministry of metaphor, with Turner once asking:

What part, if any, can and should the art world play in revitalizing people of a perhaps degenerative culture, a culture in which people seem to be morally soft, often, and unaware of their actions, insensitive to the moral religious values in situations? Have not art and those people who know its value more to say than they have said, not only to make art a more vital and integral part of community life, but to minister to the spiritual needs in the broadest sense of the term?⁷⁴

The pedagogy and philosophy of Turner wasn’t a sectarian incongruence with the mission of Black Mountain College—it was an aptly radical assertion on the role of art as life, which was the foundational premise of the college’s approach and the defining thesis of the American avant-garde.

In the biographic portfolio of Turner, *Shaping Silence: A Life in Clay* (2003), the spiritual connection between the use of silence in Quakerism and the practice of Turner’s pottery is described in mystical terms:

Turner seems to have discovered natural sources of Zen aesthetics...[he] always recognized the value of simplicity and quiet. His manner is modest. Even in the celebrated experimental environment of Black Mountain College, a landmark site for contemporary art, he calls his studio a “pot shop.”⁷⁵

M.C. Richards, one of Turner’s students (who eventually joined the college faculty) reflected on the kinesthetic iconography of Turner’s art-making practice in her highly-influential 1964 book *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*:

Another picture from which I draw inspiration: Robert Turner, sitting at the potter’s wheel in our shop at Black Mountain College, giving a demonstration. He was centering the clay, and then he was opening it and pulling up the walls of the cylinder. He was not looking at the clay. He had his ear to it. He was listening. ‘It is breathing,’ he said; and then he filled it with air.⁷⁶

Richards perpetuated Quakerly artistry when she delivered an address at the Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology,⁷⁷ which she published in her collection of talks *The Crossing Point* (1973). Richards’ companion, the dancer and potter Paulus Bernsohn taught weaving and graphics at Pendle Hill and was quite active in Quaker communities since his youth.⁷⁸ Richards would stay at Pendle Hill with Berensohn when he taught there and at Swarthmore.



Quiet House (exterior), Lake Eden Campus, Black Mountain College. The stone used in the construction of the building was exclusively sourced from the college's campus by Alex "Bill" Reed, a Quaker, who co-built the structure with Molly Gregory, also a Quaker. Accessed and reproduced with permission of the Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

The Quiet House

The closest building Black Mountain College had to a chapel was the Quiet House built in 1942, which mimicked the aesthetic of a Quaker meetinghouse. Alex Reed, apprentice to, and prefect of, Anni and Josef Albers, designed and built the Quiet House as a memorial, which has been well-documented in *Black Mountain College Studies* and exhibits. What has been less documented is that Reed was a Quaker. Before arriving at the college, Reed attended a Quaker camp in Pennsylvania and after his time at the college, he worked at a Civilian Service Camp operated by the Quakers; there, he stayed in touch with the Alberses, exchanging letters about the German mystic Meister Eckhart's symmetry with Quaker concepts.⁷⁹ The Quiet House was co-designed by teaching assistant, Molly Gregory, who later became a Quaker herself. In a 1971 interview, Gregory noted that the quiet meetings that happened in the chapel were of the Quaker tradition.⁸⁰ Students, such as Hannelore Hahn, called it "the Quaker Quiet

House.”⁸¹ One of the quintessential college buildings and one of the few remaining (albeit altered) monuments to Black Mountain College was a Quaker sanctuary.

Indeed, Quakers made Black Mountain College happen. College co-founder Ted Dreier reflected that Gregory was one of the most remarkable educators we ever had on the faculty, and no account of the college would be complete without mention of the crucial part she played. She was the one person, above others, in those years who was able through all the strain to convey to the students that the college was still something we were doing together and something that was tremendously worthwhile.”⁸² Quakers like Gregory believed in the anti-status quo mission of the school—and put in the elbow grease to bring it from an idea into an institution.

Modern Education and Quaker Principles

Contrary to Duberman’s assertion that Quakers had “little interest in experimental education,”⁸³ Quaker involvement in Black Mountain College shouldn’t be surprising. At the time of Black Mountain College’s operation, Quaker pedagogy was embracing similar values to those practiced at BMC. As John A. Lester said in the inaugural address of the Friends Council of Education in 1931, two years before Black Mountain College’s founding:

It is not by chance that the doctrines of modern education have found so warm a welcome in Quaker schools...Notice three striking fundamental agreements: The objective of education is to make desirable changes in the way of living...The child’s creative urge is the precious stuff to release and rely on...[And] the insistence of the modern educator on daily periods of quiet.⁸⁴

Lester and Aydelotte were frequently interacting at retreats for Quaker education.⁸⁵ Given how engaged Aydelotte was in the college’s activities throughout its two-plus decades of operation, it is reasonable to presume that Aydelotte and Lester spoke of Black Mountain College. Therefore, the connection between the Black Mountain College operation and inception and the stated aims of modern American Quaker education had few degrees of separation.

Conclusion: Redeeming Ray Trayer

In this article, I have argued that the field of Black Mountain College Studies needs to reconsider the Quakers because the narrative set forth by Martin Duberman was editorialized in a way that did not represent the totality of the Quaker's contributions. Duberman's description of the campus Quakers as oppositional figures to the flow of the college is typified in the case of Ray Trayer, the Quaker agricultural teacher and interim rector of Black Mountain College.

During a particularly tense faculty meeting where Paul Goodman's predatory and inappropriate "sexual aggressiveness" (including his self-documented flippant sexualization of children)⁸⁶ was being defended as "sexual freedom"⁸⁷ by Albert William "Bill" Levi, Trayer—a pacifist—punched Levi. Trayer's punch was a delicious *coup de poing* for Duberman's case that the Quakers were a no-fun bloc of bastards⁸⁸ akin to "middle-aged ladies and European Victorians."⁸⁹ However, in a contemporary "Time's Up" society reckoning with monstrous status quo of sexual harassment and abuse in American academe at-large, posterity gives Trayer a clap on the back for giving Goodman a punch in the face.

Trayer, who left Black Mountain to manage the farm at the Quakerly Earlham College,⁹⁰ declined to be interviewed in 1967 for *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*. This rejection likely allowed Duberman to have some fun with Trayer, absent his interview. However, in the letter denying Duberman's interview request, Trayer offers what I believe to be one of the most precise and poetic descriptions of Black Mountain College's mission and meaning. Indeed, Trayer, a key Quaker at the college, got it right:

Black Mountain College was an idea that refused to become sufficiently institutionalized to succeed; and it had done so probably would have ceased to express the idea. That it was even born, grew, and blossomed as it did is a tribute to the strength and appeal of the idea, and to the energies and devotion of many persons who believed in it. It deserves not so much to be written about (although I hope you will) as to be tried again, and again by each new generation

to provide that ferment and challenge to an educational world much of which continues to exist without really being alive.⁹¹

¹ Duberman, Martin, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1972, 1993), 320.

² Duberman, *Black Mountain*, xxii.

³ Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 439.

⁴ Hahn, Hannelore, interview by Martin Duberman, 32 April 1967, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.

⁵ In assessing the archival records of Duberman's transcripts, there were positive associations connecting Quakers to the spirit of the college that were de-prioritized.

⁶ Elliston, Jon, "FBI Investigation of Black Mountain College Revealed in Newly Released Files," *Carolina Public Press*, August 5, 2015, <https://carolinapublicpress.org/23088/fbi-investigation-of-black-mountain-college-revealed-in-newly-released-file/>. Accessed Jan. 15, 2022.

⁷ Hahn, Hannelore, "Black Mountain College," *Hannelore Hahn Blog*, Aug. 2012, <https://www.hannelorehahn.com/black-mountain-college-2/>. Accessed Jan. 15, 2022.

⁸ Such may have been the case with BMC student and Coast Guard and Navy veteran Trueman MacHenry, who has been profiled by David Silver and had a personal account recorded in this journal. In "Black Mountain College by Trueman MacHenry, BMC Alum," (Vol. 12) MacHenry provides a rather tepid assessment of the Quaker presence on campus, acknowledging that the Quakers "were liked on their own merits and for the real contribution that they made to the life of the college," while also attempting a "Protestant reformation." MacHenry, then negates his assessment with "This tale must not be interpreted, by the way, as indicating any animosity at BMC towards Quakers in general or these Quakers in particular."

⁹ Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 320.

¹⁰ Emmett Ryan, James, *Imaginary Friends: Representing Quakers in American Culture 1650-1950* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2009), 204.

¹¹ Duberman, "Male Impotence in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Signs* 4, no. 2 (1978), 395–401.

¹² "Paul's Story," The Paul Robeson House of Princeton, <https://thepaulrobesonhouseofprinceton.org/about-paul-robeson/>. Accessed Jan. 15, 2022.

¹³ Eichenberg, Fritz, *Art and Faith* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1952, 1962), 4.

¹⁴ Mürer, Esther, "Quakers on the Arts, 1658-1995," *Friends Journal*, <https://www.friendsjournal.org/2002044/>. Accessed Feb. 19, 2022.

¹⁵ Quaker involvement in radical, multi-national educational adventures in the mid-twentieth century was not anomalous to Black Mountain College. In 1950, Alabama Quakers fled to a mountain in the cloud forests of Costa Rica to start the Monteverde Friends School as a rejection of the militarized status quo of the United States.

¹⁶ Machenry, Trueman, “Black Mountain College by Trueman MacHenry, BMC Alum,” *The Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*, Vol. 12.

¹⁷ Littleton, Harvey, interview with Joan Falconer Byrd, 2001, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-harvey-k-littleton-11795#transcript>. Accessed Jan. 15, 2022.

¹⁸ Soltz, Wendy F. “Just Miles Away but Worlds Apart: Examining Jewish Participation in Integration Programs at Black Mountain College and Highlander Folk School, 1933–1964,” *AJS Review* 41, no. 1 (2017), 203–33.

¹⁹ Washington, George, “Letter to the Annual Meeting of Quakers,” *Teaching American History*, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-the-annual-meeting-of-quakers/>. Accessed Jan. 13, 2022.

²⁰ Ates, Alex, “Citizenship in a Space, on a Stage, at a School, in the South: Xanti Schawinsky’s Stage Studies at Black Mountain College,” *Theatre Symposium: A Journal of the Southeastern Theatre Conference (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press 2020)*, 78–89.

²¹ Uncanny connections emerged, such as learning that Black Mountain professors Allan and Elizabeth Sly visited Westtown in 1939 and likely stayed in the school farmhouse where I reside, which was guest housing at the time of their visit. Pendle Hill, the Quaker education center that became a recruiting ground and sanctuary for Black Mountaineers (discussed later in this article) was founded in this same farmhouse in 1929. Former headmasters (a now-obsolete title in Quaker education due to its violent connotations) of Westtown visited Black Mountain College during annual visits into Carolina Quaker country to visit alumni and constituents.

²² Butler, Lindley S., “Quakers,” *Encyclopedia of North Carolina*, edited by William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): <https://www.ncpedia.org/quakers>. Accessed Jan. 15, 2022.

²³ Neely, Sharlotte, “The Quaker Era of Cherokee Indian Education, 1880-1892.” *Appalachian Journal* 2, no. 4 (1975), 314–22.

²⁴ “CPS Unit Number 019-01,” Civilian Public Service, <https://civilianpublicservice.org/camps/19/1>. Accessed Jan. 11, 2022.

²⁵ Larson, Kay, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the inner life of artists* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

²⁶ According to a 1933 internal memo by Holt: “In fine, [Rice] was indiscreet in utterance, intolerant of opinion, often insulting in manner and attitude, unethical in professional conduct, and in general an obstrucater and disturber.” Holt, Herbert. Letter to unknown. 1933, exact date unknown. W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

²⁷ Rice, John Andrew, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 318.

²⁸ Walton, Richard J, *Swarthmore College: An Informal History* (Swarthmore: Swarthmore College, 1986), p 33.

- ²⁹ Walton, *Swarthmore College*, 31.
- ³⁰ Lane, Jane C., "Chapter 06: A College in Crisis (The Rice Affair), 1933," *Rollins College: A Centennial History* (2017): 141. <https://lib.rollins.edu/olin/Archives/Rollinshistory.pdf>. Accessed Jan. 14, 2022.
- ³¹ Aydelotte, Frank, letter to H.S. Hilley. 5 May 1954. Aydelotte Papers, Personal Papers 1905-1956. Swarthmore College Special Collections and Archives.
- ³² "President Aydelotte of Swarthmore To Go To Princeton," *The Brown and White*. 28 Oct. 1939. Westtown School Archives.
- ³³ Aydelotte, letter to John Andrew Rice. 5 Oct, 1933, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ³⁴ Thomas, Sue Turner, "The Sense of the Meeting," *The Meaning of Swarthmore*, <https://www.swarthmore.edu/meaning-swarthmore/sense-meeting>. Accessed on Jan. 14, 2022.
- ³⁵ Richards, M.C. "Black Mountain College: A Golden Seed," *Craft Horizons*, 1 June, 1977: 22.
- ³⁶ Gregory, Molly, interview by Mary E. Harris, 31 Mar. 1971, Black Mountain College Records, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ³⁷ Aydelotte, letter to N.O. Pittenger, 8 Mar. 1949, Swarthmore College Archives.
- ³⁸ Aydelotte, telegram to Robert Wunsch, 29 Nov. 1940, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ³⁹ Aydelotte, letter to Nell Rice, 12 May 1954, Swarthmore College Archives. Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.
- ⁴⁰ Aydelotte, letter to H.S. Hilley, 5 May 1955, Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴¹ Aydelotte, letter to Charles Olson, 18 May 1954, Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴² Black Mountain College Board of Fellows (Charles Olson, Joseph Fiore, Wesley Huss, Stefan Wolpe, Anthony Landreau), letter to Nell Rice, 10 May 1955, Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴³ Aydelotte, letter to H.S. Hilley, 4 May 1955, Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴⁴ Aydelotte, letter to Henry Allen Moe, 4 May 1955, Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴⁵ Hilley, Howard, letter to Aydelotte, 6, Oct. 1954. Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴⁶ Aydelotte, letter to Hilley, 13 Oct. 1954, Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴⁷ Olson, Charles, letter to Aydelotte, 26 May 1955. Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴⁸ Aydelotte, letter to Olson, 1 June 1955. Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁴⁹ Aydelotte, letter to Raymond Trayer, 24 Feb. 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁵⁰ Trayer, letter to Aydelotte, 25, February 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁵¹ Aydelotte, telegram to Trayer, 9 March. 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁵² Aydelotte, letter to Trayer, 24 Feb. 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁵³ Aydelotte, letter to N.O. Pittinger, 16 June 1949, Swarthmore College Archives.

- ⁵⁴ Aydelotte, letter to Pittenger, 22 March 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁵⁵ Dreier, Theodore, letter to Ray and Dottie Trayer, 22 April 1946, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁵⁶ Dreier, telegram to Mary R. Gregory, 6 May 1946, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁵⁷ Duberman, *Black Mountain College*, 437.
- ⁵⁸ Miller, Mark, "I Was a Staff Member," American Friends Service Network, <https://peaceworks.afsc.org/mark-miller/story/477>. Accessed on Jan. 14, 2022.
- ⁵⁹ Hanstein, Kathleen Hambly, letter to Robert "Bob" Wunsch, 17 Oct. 1944, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁶⁰ Trayer, letter to Wendell Hinkey, 28 Feb. 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁶¹ Hinkey, Wendell, letter to Trayer, 24 March 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁶² Pickett, Charles, letter to Aydelotte, 2 June 1954, Swarthmore College Archives.
- ⁶³ Chase, Marilyn, *Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books 2020): 49; I would like to offer special thanks to Professor Caroline McAlister of Guilford College whose research on Asawa has been significant. McAlister supported the writing of this article.
- ⁶⁴ John Andrew Rice's daughter, Mary A.R. Marshall, didn't attend his school of Black Mountain College, although she was of age to attend—she went to Swarthmore.
- ⁶⁵ Trayer, Dorothy, letter to Frederick Mangold, 4 Aug. 1942, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁶⁶ Mather, Eleanore Price, *Pendle Hill: A Quaker Experiment in Community* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publishing, 1980), 4.
- ⁶⁷ Mather, *Pendle Hill*, 2.
- ⁶⁸ Mather, *Pendle Hill*, 3.
- ⁶⁹ Mather, *Pendle Hill*, 4.
- ⁷⁰ Mather, *Pendle Hill*, 19.
- ⁷¹ McCandles, John, letter to the Board of Fellows of Black Mountain College, 29 April 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.
- ⁷² Benfey, Christopher, *Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 172.
- ⁷³ Turner, Robert, interview by Margaret Carney, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-chapman-turner-12010#transcript>. Accessed on Jan. 13, 2022.
- ⁷⁴ Turner, Biography, Robert Turner website, <https://www.robertcturner.com/bio.html>, accessed on Jan. 14, 2022.

⁷⁵ Koplos, Janet, *Robert Turner: Shaping Silence, A Life in Clay*, edited by Marsha Miro and Tony Hepburn (New York: Kodansha International, 2003), 2.

⁷⁶ Richards, M.C., *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), 40.

⁷⁷ I first became aware of the Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology in October 2021 while I was on a personal retreat at Pendle Hill to complete the writing of my thesis at New York University. Also staying there were the organizers of the conference, conducting their annual planning meeting. We shared many meals together and the women (the conference is female-led) told me about the organization's history: it was founded by Quaker Jungian psychologists in 1943 to support veterans and contentious objector battlefield medics through the post-traumatic stress of combat.

⁷⁸ Berensohn, Paulus, interview by Mark Shapiro, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-paulus-berensohn-15906#transcript>. Accessed Jan. 13, 2022.

⁷⁹ Benfey, *Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay*, 135.

⁸⁰ Gregory, interview with Harris, 1971, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.

⁸¹ Hahn, Hannelore, interview by Martin Duberman, 32 April 1967, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.

⁸² Dreier, Theodore, letter of resignation to Black Mountain College Advisory Council, 10 May 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.

⁸³ Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 320.

⁸⁴ Lester, John, "The Place of Quaker Schools in Contemporary Education" (1931), *Chronicles of Quaker Education* (reprint). Winter 2012, 4.

⁸⁵ Walker, James, "Principal's Report to the General Committee," 17 Oct. 1931, Westtown School Archives.

⁸⁶ Friednberg, Edgar Z., "Paul Goodman," *Prospects*, Vol. 23, no. 3/4, June 1994: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/goodmane.PDF>, accessed on Jan. 14, 2022.

⁸⁷ Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 351.

⁸⁸ I deploy this word because Duberman describes Joel Oppenheimer jumping on Trayer's back and calling him a "fucking bastard!" Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 351.

⁸⁹ Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 349.

⁹⁰ Trayer, Raymond, Friends Collection and Earlham College Archives, https://archives.earlham.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/39113, accessed Jan. 14, 2022.

⁹¹ Trayer, letter to Duberman, 19 March 1967, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives.