

Osborn, Charles ^[1]

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by Randall M. Miller, 1991

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Charles Osborn, [abolitionist](#) ^[2] and [Quaker](#) ^[3] minister, was born in [Guilford County](#) ^[4], the son of David and Margaret Stout Osborn and the grandson of Matthew and Isabel Dobson Osborn of Sussex County, Del. Little is known of Osborn's early life. At age nineteen he moved with his parents to Knox County, Tenn., and in 1798 he married Sarah Newman. Before her death in 1812, they had seven children: James, Josiah, John, Isaiah, Lydia, Elijah, and Elihu. In 1813 Osborn married Hannah Swain, who survived him by twenty-eight years. By his second wife, Osborn had nine children: Narcissa, Cynthia, Gideon, Charles N., Parker B., Jordan, Benjamin, Sarah S., and Anna.

About 1806 Osborn became a Quaker minister, his lifework and the animating force for his humanitarian interests. As was the wont of the Quaker ministry in the nineteenth century, Osborn traveled extensively to preach at Quaker meetings. From 1806 to 1840, the active period of his ministry, he visited most existing meetings in the United States and Canada and a considerable number in Great Britain and on the Continent. The [peripatetic](#) ^[5] Osborn was also involved in the significant Quaker migration from North Carolina, through Tennessee, to the Old Northwest. In 1816 he left Tennessee to settle in Mount Pleasant, Ohio, before departing for [Wayne County](#) ^[6], Ind., in 1819, where he helped to lay out the town of Economy in 1825. Osborn returned to Ohio in 1827, but by 1830 he had resettled in Wayne County, Ind. In 1842 he moved to Cass County, Mich., and in 1848 he established his last residence, in Porter County, Ind.

Osborn's early [perambulations](#) ^[7] through North Carolina and Tennessee awakened him to the travail of [slavery](#) ^[8], and he became a confirmed foe of the institution while still a young man. Coming to maturity at a time when the Society of Friends was throwing off worldly ways for a return to the inner kingdom, Osborn inherited a rich and vigorous reform tradition. His contacts with northern and English reformers reinforced his reform convictions. Although he supported a host of humanitarian concerns, he devoted most of his energies to the slavery issue. A compelling speaker and an indefatigable organizer, he was instrumental in founding several antislavery societies in the South and the West.

As early as 1815 Osborn joined other transplanted North Carolina Quakers at Lost Creek Meeting, Tenn., to establish the Tennessee Manumission Society, an organization that prospered through the 1820s as a result of his cautious petitions for gradual, compensated emancipation. Also in 1815 he carried his antislavery message to Mount Pleasant, Ohio, where his moral example and inspiration convinced Benjamin Lundy, then in the seedtime of his own antislavery witness, to form the Union Humane Society, Ohio's first antislavery society. The next year Osborn agitated for emancipation in Guilford County, N.C. There he exercised a powerful, although transitory, influence in pushing the Manumission Society of North Carolina towards a more resolute stance in behalf of abolition. He also founded several local antislavery groups, all of which were short-lived. Contrary to the arguments of George Julian, none of these early societies advocated immediate abolition, each preferring—in varying degrees of intensity—compensated, gradual abolition and colonization. Osborn demurred on the last point.

In August 1817, at Mount Pleasant, Ohio, he began publishing *The Philanthropist*, a weekly forum for the discussion of slavery, war, Indian suffering, and related evils. Osborn's chief editorial contribution to his paper was a searching analysis of African colonization, which he branded impractical financially and wrong morally. In this he anticipated the Garrisonian criticism of colonization as an iniquitous design to expatriate free blacks and, through its assurance of compensation to slaveholders, as a means to retard true abolition and to dupe reformers into acknowledging the slaveholder's right to property in his slaves.

In 1818 Osborn sold the paper to Elisha Bates and went to Indiana. In Wayne County, he embraced the peculiarly Quaker doctrine of [Free Produce](#) ^[9], which exhorted the public to abstain from consuming the products of slave labor. By boycotting slave products, Free Produce advocates like Osborn sought to forge an economic weapon to strike at slavery and, at the same time, to cleanse themselves of any contamination from the hated institution. Wayne County became the focus of Free Produce activities in the West, and Osborn, along with fellow native North Carolina and Quaker, [Levi Coffin](#) ^[10], was a leading proponent of the cause.

Osborn's growing preoccupation with abolition conflicted with the conservative temperament of many Indiana Quakers. The Society of Friends, brittle and partially fragmented after years of internal dissension over social policy and polity, was in Indiana convulsed by disputes between reform radicals of the Osborn stripe and conservatives who wanted Friends to eschew politics and to confine their reform attention to the Society of Friends. In 1842 the conservative faction expelled Osborn and his associates from the Meeting for Sufferings of the Indiana Yearly Meeting. A schism ensued. Osborn and about two thousand like-minded Friends seceded from the Indiana Yearly Meeting to form the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Antislavery Friends in 1843. Although the seceders never received official sanction from any other Yearly Meeting, Osborn used the separation to force the antislavery issue upon the Society of Friends. With Levi Coffin, the most prominent

seceder, he tirelessly prepared addresses, memorials, and defenses for radical antislavery action. In one of his last acts, Osborn drafted an 1849 memorial to Congress condemning the government's involvement in slavery by its reluctance to prohibit slavery in the territories and abolish it in the District of Columbia. This memorial reflected Osborn's partial digestion of the militant Garrisonian strain of abolition and his growing impatience with northern tolerance for slavery. He died the following year as he was preparing a blast against the Fugitive Slave Act.^[11]

No portrait of Osborn is known to exist, although his posthumously published *Journal* gives a revealing intellectual and spiritual likeness of the Quaker abolitionist.

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Authors:

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