William Ladd Biography

William Ladd

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Biography

The American pacifist William Ladd (1778-1841) organized the first effective peace society, in 1828.

William Ladd, the son of a wealthy sea captain and shipbuilder of old New England stock, was born in Exeter, N.H., on May 10, 1778. After graduating from Harvard College, Ladd took command of several of his father's finest ships. A hearty and kindly man, Ladd earnestly desired to improve society. For several years he put his efforts into a Florida venture in free labor that was intended to create an alternative to slavery but was unsuccessful.

Ladd settled with his wife in Minot, Maine, where he became a prosperous farmer. He opposed the War of 1812 and adopted pacifist ideals; these became his major cause. In 1824-1825 he addressed peace groups in Maine and Massachusetts and in 1828 took the lead in setting up the American Peace Society--the first such group to achieve strength and continuity.

In an era of radical change involving abolitionists, religious innovators, and others, Ladd's contribution appeared mild, as in his *A Brief Illustration of the Principles of War and Peace, by Philanthropos* (1831). However, Ladd contributed new techniques for advancing this kind of crusade, as when he approached legislators to get approval of peace resolutions, circulated petitions to involve other citizens, and invited women (in a pamphlet called *On the Duty of Females to Promote the Cause of Peace,* 1836) to join the movement.

In his desire to unite social elements on the peace issue rather than set them in opposition, Ladd was essentially conservative. In 1837 he became a licensed Congregational clergyman to provide an additional forum for his message. *An Essay on a Congress of Nations* (1840) was a landmark in international thinking that influenced his successor, Elihu Burritt, and directly affected the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907 as well as the World Court and League of Nations.

Ladd's incessant labors as organizer and as editor of *Friend of Peace* and *Harbinger of Peace* absorbed all his time and affected his health. In later years he suffered partial paralysis. Though of a reasonable and friendly disposition, he was unable to stint his strength where his work was concerned; he died April 9, 1841, in Portsmouth, N.H. He has been viewed as a martyr to his movement.