



Liberty vs. Slavery: New Jersey's Quakers and the American Revolution

Central issue, problem, or question: How did the Quakers, many of whom owned slaves before 1776, come to see the enslavement of Africans as incompatible with Christian precepts? How did this religious conviction shape the Quakers' understanding of revolutionary principles?

Significance: This lesson examines the beliefs and experiences of New Jersey's Quakers who, in the decades before the American Revolution, became convinced that slavery was inconsistent with the Christian golden rule and that liberty was the birthright of black, as well as white, Americans. It focuses on how the Quakers applied this belief to their own lives and to the American Revolution.

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies:
Standard 6.4 (United States and New Jersey History). **Middle School: E-1** (Discuss the background and major issues of the American Revolution); **E-4** (Explain New Jersey's critical role in the American Revolution). **High School: E-1** (Discuss the social, political, and religious aspects of the American Revolution); **E-2** (Analyze the social and economic impact of the Revolutionary War); **E-5** (Analyze New Jersey's role in the American Revolution).

Objectives: After examining primary source documents that focus on Quakers' growing commitment to abolishing the institution of slavery, students will be able to:

- Describe the process through which the Society of Friends cemented its commitment to abolishing slavery among its members.
- Analyze the reasoning behind Quaker anti-slavery arguments.
- Explore how religious and natural rights arguments against slavery shaped a critique of the revolutionary ideal of liberty.

Abstract: This lesson explores the emergence of anti-slavery conviction during the period of the American Revolution and the ideological problem posed by the institution of slavery. Middle school students will read excerpts from Quaker anti-slavery literature, afterwards creating their own pamphlets and petitions. High school students will outline Quaker arguments against slavery and analyze the Declaration of Independence from a Quaker perspective.

Duration: Two 45-minute class periods.

Sources

Secondary Sources

Jean Soderlund online lecture: "New Jersey Quakers in the American Revolution," July 2003; available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "Quakers" section.

Jean Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, 1989).

Primary Sources

John Hepburn, *The American Defense of the Christian Golden Rule, or An Essay to Prove the Unlawfulness of Making Slaves of Men*, 1715.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc1.pdf>

John Woolman, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes, Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination*, 1754.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc2.pdf>

Samuel Allinson to Patrick Henry, 17 October 1774.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc3.pdf>

Petition of the Inhabitants of Chesterfield to the New Jersey Legislature, 1775.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc4.pdf>

Samuel Allinson to William Livingston, 13 July 1778.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc5.pdf>

Materials: Teachers will require copies of primary source documents listed above.

Background: Quakers made up a sixth of New Jersey's population during the revolutionary period. In the early decades of the eighteenth-century, many Quakers owned slaves, and some were large slaveholders. But after a long and

passionate debate on the topic of slavery, members determined that slaveholders should play no role in the Society of Friends. John Hepburn was an early opponent of slavery who argued in 1715 that slavery was an “Anti-Christian Practice.” The more politic John Woolman was a leader of the movement to abolish slaveholding among Quakers and other Christians, beginning with the publication of his 1754 pamphlet *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*. The moral strength of Woolman’s arguments helped persuade his co-religionists to begin the process of abolishing slaveholding with a 1758 rule that forbade Quakers to buy or sell slaves. In 1776, the New Jersey and Pennsylvania Friends prohibited members from owning slaves. In response to the rule, some slaveholding Quakers left the society; others remained members by manumitting their slaves. The Quaker commitment to abolishing slavery also produced a critique of revolutionary ideology. Samuel Allinson, a lawyer and a prominent New Jersey Quaker, challenged revolutionary leaders like Patrick Henry and William Livingston to adopt a more consistent ideal of liberty. Among white Americans, the Quakers were leaders of the anti-slavery movement in both the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, and their use of revolutionary ideals to condemn the institution of slavery would remain a major weapon in the abolitionist arsenal.

Key Words:

Society of Friends/Quakers

Meeting

Manumission

Abolition

Middle School Procedures

The middle school lesson will take the form of a cooperative learning activity. The teacher should begin the lesson with a brief lecture on Quakers' commitment to pacifism and the abolition of slavery during the Revolutionary War (based on Jean Soderlund's online lecture). Dr. Soderlund’s lecture is available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the “Quakers” section.

Afterwards, students will read excerpts from two Quaker anti-slavery pamphlets:

- John Hepburn, *American Defense of the Christian Golden Rule*.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc1.pdf>
- John Woolman, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc2.pdf>

Based on these two documents, students will outline Quaker arguments against the institution of slavery, focusing on the negative effects of slavery on both the slave and his master. As a class, they will identify the key points in the Quaker

anti-slavery argument. The teacher will then assign each group to create an informational pamphlet or poster, illustrating (with pictures and prose) one of the key points in the Quaker argument against slavery. Each group will be required to give an oral presentation explaining their pamphlet.

After presenting their pamphlets, students will read:

- Petition of the Inhabitants of Chesterfield.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc4.pdf>
- Samuel Allinson to William Livingston.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc5.pdf>

Based on these two documents and what they learned from the above lesson, individual students or cooperative groups will write a petition to New Jersey's Provincial Congress from the perspective of an anti-slavery Quaker. These petitions should be dated July 1, 1776 (the day before the Provincial Congress adopted the state's first constitution) and explain why the state should abolish the institution of slavery; they should employ both religious arguments and revolutionary principles to justify the abolition of slavery.

High School Procedures

This lesson will begin with a short lecture (based on Jean Soderlund's online lecture) about Quaker beliefs and the debate that preceded their decision to abolish slaveholding within the Society of Friends. Dr. Soderlund's lecture is available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "Quakers" section.

After the lecture, the lesson will take the form of a cooperative learning activity where the students will be divided into groups. In these groups, they will read:

- John Woolman, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc2.pdf>
- Petition of the Inhabitants of Chesterfield.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc4.pdf>
- Samuel Allinson to William Livingston.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc5.pdf>

After reading the documents, students will outline the authors' main arguments against slavery, distinguishing between religious and natural rights arguments. They will present these outlines to the class, possibly using PowerPoint and a LCD projector.

Students will also be graded on a written assignment. They will read:

- The Declaration of Independence (a copy is printed in the back of most U.S. history textbooks).
- Samuel Allinson to Patrick Henry.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/quakers/documents/quakersDoc3.pdf>

Afterwards, they will write their own letter to Thomas Jefferson. The letter should be written from the perspective of a Quaker, responding to the ideals stated in the Declaration and explaining why slavery ought to be abolished in the new nation. Alternately, the teacher might require students to write an essay on the question: Who was more revolutionary, Samuel Allinson or Thomas Jefferson?

Connections: This lesson could be part of a larger unit on revolutionary ideology. It might also be used to trace the origins of the anti-slavery movement in the United States. Teachers could incorporate it into a unit on Quakers during the American Revolution, focusing on Quaker's pacifist and anti-slavery beliefs. It might also be part of a unit on African Americans during the American Revolution.