

Rhetoric about slaves and slavery in the Revolutionary era (1757-1787)

At the time of the Revolutionary War, American slavery had been in place for almost 160 years and was a major source of labor in the 13 colonies. Just as this system of human trafficking and forced labor became more entrenched in the southern colonies, and with many of the founding fathers both owning slaves and supporting the institution, anti-slavery sentiment also began to grow and spread. Especially as white colonists rallied around the cause of freedom from British rule and equality for all men, the hypocrisy of the slave labor system became more apparent for many people. Additionally, well known Africans and African Americans such as the poet Phyllis Wheatley, the writer and naturalist Benjamin Banneker, and the former enslaved explorer and writer Olaudah Equiano provided proof of Africans' intelligence and potential in terms that European Americans could understand and appreciate.

Though Quakers had expressed anti-slavery views as early as 1688, organized opposition to the institution took much longer to develop. The main ruling body of the Presbyterian Church in America drew national and international attention in 1787 when it recommended that members of the church "do everything in their power...to promote the abolition of Slavery, and the instruction of Negroes whether bond or free." Though definitive in its stance on slavery, the church stopped short of censuring or expelling slaveholding Presbyterians, and qualified their stance on slavery with the warning that enslaved people would not be ready for immediate emancipation. In this way the Presbyterian Church helped set a precedent that would be used for the next 70 years or so: taking a moral stance against slavery with no serious action to dismantle the institution.

Samuel Davies (1723-1761) and Benjamin Rush (1746-1813) each wrote eloquently during the revolutionary era about the evils of slavery, though both men at some time in their lives owned slaves and benefitted from the American slave labor system. Davies focused on the spiritual equality of enslaved people (all humans have souls) and the responsibility of masters to educate and bring slaves into the Christian faith, while Rush nearly 20 years later promoted full abolition and outlined the steps to get there.

William Harrison Taylor, who currently teaches history at Alabama State University, writes about the Presbyterian Church's 1787 decision to promote abolition. Adding to previous scholarship on this subject, Taylor argues that it was not just racism, but also church precedent in dealing with conflict, that made the Presbyterian Church promote abolition while refusing to condemn slaveholders directly or work towards immediate emancipation.

Document 1: Samuel Davies Sermon

Davies, Samuel. *The Duty of Christians to Propagate their Religion among Heathens, Earnestly Recommended to the Masters of Negroe Slaves in Virginia, A Sermon Preached in Hanover, January 8, 1757* (London: Printed by J. Oliver, 1758).

PHS Call number: CR WW10 D28

**See especially the first three pages (pp. 7-9). This document was printed using the "long s". The long s (ſ) is a form of the lower case letter "s" that was used by printers until the early 19th century. It was used in place of a single "s" at the beginning of a word or within a word, or as the first letter in a double s (e.g. "ſinfulneſs" for "sinfulness" and "ſelf defenſive war" for "self defensive war").*

Source note: Samuel Davies (1723-1761) was a Presbyterian minister whose religion was strongly influenced by the Great Awakening. Davies was a skilled orator whose sermons drew a large following, and he made a name for himself as a preacher on the Virginia frontier in Hanover County. In a paradox typical of his time, Davies owned two slaves while also serving as a missionary to enslaved African Americans in Virginia, and advocating for religious education for enslaved people. Davies left Virginia in 1759 to serve as president of Princeton University until his death in 1761.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author? Who is the intended audience for this document?
2. According to Davies, in what way are humans similar to “angels or archangels”? What point is he making with this comparison (page 8)?
3. What responsibility do slave owners have to their enslaved people, according to Davies (page 8)?
4. What point does Davies illustrate by referring to Abraham, and the way that this biblical patriarch had control over his entire household, including slaves?
5. What is traditional in Davies’s thinking about enslaved people? What is radical about it?

Document 2: Benjamin Rush Address

Rush, Benjamin. *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, upon Slave-keeping* (Philadelphia: [J. Dunlap], 1773).

PHS Call number: CR AMER 1773 E12991

**See especially pages 1-4, 20-22, 28-30; printed "s" looks like "f".*

Source note: Benjamin Rush (1746-1813) was a prominent citizen of Philadelphia, a member of the Continental Congress, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Rush was raised in a devout Presbyterian family and trained as a physician in Scotland. He opened his own medical practice in 1769 and also taught chemistry at the College of Philadelphia. Rush was appointed treasurer of the U.S. Mint by President John Adams in 1797 and served in that post until his death. Rush was a committed abolitionist for most of his life, and was a member of the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society, for which he served as secretary and president. His opposition to slavery arose from his faith—the belief that slavery went against God—and from the idea of personal freedom that was enshrined in the Constitution. He also owned at least one slave, and had a personal stake in the institution of slavery while at the same time condemning it.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author? What is the historical context in which it was written? Do you think this is a reliable source on the topic of rhetoric about slaves and slavery during the Revolutionary era?
2. What does Rush claim is his purpose for writing this address (page 1)?
3. What evidence does Rush provide in order to dismiss racist arguments of Africans' intellectual and social inferiority (page 2)?
4. According to Rush, what is the first step in abolishing slavery in the United States (page 21)? What action does he suggest as a way to take that first step?
5. Rush suggests that those enslaved people who “are unfit to be set at liberty” should be educated and taught about business so they can be self-sufficient later (page 22). How common was the idea, at this time, that some or all enslaved people were “unfit” for freedom and independent lives?
6. Why does Rush specifically address Christian ministers on the subject of slavery (pages 28-29)? What is he asking them to do?

Document 3: Synod of New York and Philadelphia Minutes

Synod of New York and Philadelphia. *Minutes* [manuscript], May 26 and May 28, 1787.

PHS Call number: VF BX 8951 .A3 1758-1788

**See especially pages 434, 436-437. Please note that a printed transcription is available in Klett, Guy S., ed. Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America 1706-1788 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), pp. 627, 629 (shelved in the Presbyterian Historical Society reading room). Please note: in the manuscript version of this document, some instances of the letter "s" are formed like "f".*

Source Note: The Synod of New York and Philadelphia was the national body of Presbyterians at the time. The manuscript minutes record the first introduction of an overture—an introduction to an issue that requires further thought or action—to abolish slavery on May 26, 1787. The minutes then show how the synod amended the overture two days later, on May 28. The idea of the church’s supporting abolition had been brought before the synod earlier, but discussion of this issue was postponed throughout the Revolutionary War and the first few years of the new republic. The Committee of Overtures referred to in the document was convened specifically in order to discuss the roles and responsibilities of the Presbyterian church as related to the institution of slavery.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this document, and when was it written? Is it a reliable source?
2. Just at the end of page 433 and at the start of page 434, the Committee of Overtures brought up the issue of slavery and the suggestion that the synod should advocate for abolition. What exactly was the committee’s recommendation? How did they introduce their recommendation (end of page 433)?
3. On May 28, 1787, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia again considered the issue of slavery as brought up by the Overtures Committee two days earlier (page 436). How is the May 28th statement different from the May 26th statement? What is the Synod’s stance on the issue of slavery? What recommendations do they make with regard to the institution?
4. On page 437, the Synod recommends that its members use “the most prudent measures consistent with the interests & the state of Civil society in the countries where they live.” What do you think those measures might be? Why does the synod not just state what measures their members should take to work toward abolition?

Document 4: Taylor Secondary Source

Taylor, William Harrison, "'Made of One Flesh?': Revisiting the 1787 Slavery Policy of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia," in *Faith and Slavery in the Presbyterian Diaspora* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2016), pp. 71-94.

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Source note: William Harrison Taylor is a professor of history at Alabama State University and also teaches church history at Birmingham Theological Seminary in Montgomery, Alabama. His areas of focus are colonial and revolutionary America, social and intellectual history, and Anglo-American religion. In addition to co-editing *Faith and Slavery in the Presbyterian Diaspora*, Taylor wrote *Unity in Christ and Country: American Presbyterians in the Revolutionary Era, 1758-1801* (2017).

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this source? When was it written? Why is it a secondary source, and not a primary source? Do you find it reliable?
2. Taylor starts off this article by summarizing recent scholarship on the subject of the 1787 Presbyterian Synod's recommendation on abolition. What have those historians written about the recommendation (page 72)? What does Taylor want to add to that narrative, or change?
3. What were the Westminster Standards, and why were they so important to the Presbyterian Church in the British North American colonies at the time of the Revolutionary War (pages 72-73)?
4. What happened at the crucial 1758 reunion between the New York and Philadelphia synods? What new approach to dealing with conflicts did the two bodies develop (page 74)?
5. Taylor cites the sermons and writings of Benjamin Rush, James Armstrong, Jacob Green, and George Duffield at some length (pages 80-85). He also cites a popular pro-slavery booster, Henry Patillo (page 86). What argument is Taylor trying to support by referencing these contemporary voices on the subject of slavery?
6. Why did the Presbyterian church not do more to try to abolish slavery in the years after the Revolutionary War, according to Taylor?