



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE:

Persecution: Let's have a look

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American History I**

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** – What role did persecution play in the colonization of Plymouth and Pennsylvania?

2. **Contextual Essay** –

A Quaker named James Nayler was whipped, placed in a pillory, had a hole bored through his tongue with a hot iron, the letter “B” branded on his forehead, and was then thrown in prison for three years. What was his crime? Blasphemy. For the majority of American students, the word “persecution” is most likely foreign. It is used sparingly and is rarely discussed beyond being a reason to come to America. The fact is, as the example displays, persecution was and is a real and horrible concept that has shaped world history since the beginning. It comes in many forms and can be anything from fines to torture and execution. It is taught that the Pilgrims settled Plymouth to escape religious persecution, and that William Penn and the Quakers founded Pennsylvania as a haven for religious freedom. While much of this is true, rarely are the actual acts of persecutions explored. What forms of persecution were enacted upon these two groups? Why were they persecuted? How did this lead to the founding of Plymouth and Pennsylvania, and what are some of the lasting effects of their migrations?

The Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church, has its origins in the 1st century. It was Catholic until the famous split under Henry VIII in 1534. It is important to have an understanding of the Church of England because during much of the 16th and 17th centuries the Church of England and the government of the Crown were one in the same. To be a citizen of England also meant a person was a member of his or her majesty’s church. If government and church are one in the same, to refuse to comply with the ways of the church most likely meant one would be found guilty of sedition or other crimes against the state. “To challenge the established church was to question the state as well. In a state that defined itself in exclusive religious terms, religious dissent could never be a purely private matter; it was seen as profoundly political.” (Coffey, 97) This makes it convenient when maintaining control of a population. Uniformity breeds obedience. It was under these conditions that the Separatists’ and, later, the Quakers’ stories begin.

Separatists were a sect in society who wanted to “separate” from the Church of England. They believed that it was corrupt. They were very similar to the Puritans. The distinction is that the Puritans wanted to “purify” what they viewed as a corrupt church as well. This created a problem because of the marriage between church and state, and “despite its later reputation for moderation and tolerance, the early Church of England was firmly committed to religious persecution as any other Protestant church.” (Coffey, 24) The Separatists were few in number, but were considered a threat and described as “lewd and evil disposed persons...ready to violate and break the peace of the church, the realm, and the quietness of the people.” (Coffey, 97) They were seen as a danger to the social order. Authorities took steps to prevent the spread of ideological attacks against the Church and the Crown. “In 1583, a royal proclamation condemned the ‘seditious, schismatical, and erroneous printed books of Separatist writers Robert Browne and Robert Harrison.’” (Coffey, 97) It was now illegal to own, print, or distribute Separatists literature. This was a time when news and information were communicated through word of mouth or the written word. “In June 1583, John Copping and Elias Thacker were hanged at Bury St Edmunds for circulating Separatists writings in East Anglia...” (Coffey, 97) Being hanged for circulating alternative religious teachings, although not common, became a very real danger for Separatists. The situation worsened for the group as the years progressed. In 1593 a law was passed by Parliament which stated that all persons who did not attend church or were members of illegal sects would be imprisoned. “...the government was determined to drive home its point.” (Coffey, 98)

Under the growing threat of prison and/or death, many Separatists fled to Holland. Amsterdam failed to provide the protection they desired. “Presses printing Separatist tracts were smashed and some of the English had rocks thrown at them.” (Kelso) The relatively small group began to look elsewhere. “The decision was made to locate north of the Virginia Colony ‘some place about Hudson’s river.’ There they could be loyal subjects of King James, live by English law and with English customs, but be far enough from interference in their way of worship.” (Kelso) The rest of the story is much more familiar to Americans. The Pilgrims courageously cross the Atlantic and land on Plymouth Rock. An early example of American democracy, the Mayflower Compact, was created. Forty-one men signed this document which stated that they would “constitute and frame just and equal laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.” (Mayflower Compact. Retrieved from Lillian Goldman Law Library)

The story of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, begins years later. The Quakers, founded by George Fox, were a group that came to be during the mid 17th century. Quakers did not share the same religious beliefs as the aforementioned Separatists. They were pacifistic, egalitarian, and believed all people could communicate with God or “become aware of the Light.” (Weddle, 17) The Restoration period was the background for the persecution of the Quakers. The Protector, Oliver Cromwell, was dead, and “the accumulating fear of Quakers and the disorder they represented...contributed to the restoration of the monarchy...initiating an infectious fear so intense that it was realized in a series of repressive measures.” (Weddle, 18)

Their religious beliefs made it easy to pass laws which would allow the Quakers to be “legally” punished. The Quakers believed it was wrong to take oaths except to God. The Quaker Act of 1662 “declared that anyone who refused to swear a legally tendered oath or who met with five or more Quakers would be fined, imprisoned, and on a third conviction, transported.” (Coffey, 168) Laws were also passed to remove “dissenters” from public office. One law, the

Corporation Act, required all public officials to take oaths of allegiance and take communion in the Church of England. It is well documented that the Quakers were one of the most persecuted group in Restoration England. From 1661 to 1685, "well over 15,000 were prosecuted by imprisonment or otherwise, 450 died in gaol, and 200 were sentenced to banishment." (Coffey, 170) It is during this period of persecution in England when the Friends weigh their options and look elsewhere.

Fortunately, the Quakers had several influential members. One of these members was William Penn. Penn's father, Admiral Penn, was a very wealthy and influential man. The Duke of York, who became Charles II, was in debt to the senior Penn for 16,000 pounds. This was a stroke of luck for the Quakers. Charles II was also fortunate. By giving Penn the charter for what became Pennsylvania, he was able to get rid of the Quakers, pay off his debt, and populate the New World with another English owned colony. In 1682, 2000 settlers left England on 23 ships. The Charter of Privileges, drawn up by Penn in 1701, provided for a society far different from that in England. It stated that no one who believes in God and "profess him or themselves to live quietly under the Civil Government, shall in any case molested or prejudiced, in his Person or Estate, because of his or their conscientious Persuasion or Practice, nor be compelled to frequent or maintain any religious Worship, Place or Ministry, contrary to his or their Mind..." (Penn, retrieved from Lillian Law Library) The Quakers' ideals of freedom of conscience and equality permeated the new colony and brought thousands of people from Europe. For many, they could experience religious freedom for the first time. "Pennsylvania stood in stark contrast to England, where persecution enjoyed wide and vocal support." (Coffey, 178) The acceptance of different beliefs displayed in the Penn's Charter of Privileges can be viewed as the birth of religious freedom in America.

The Separatists and the Quakers, although at different times, experienced horrid persecution in 16th and 17th century England. These persecutions caused them to look elsewhere in search of safety and well-being. The Separatists fled across the ocean and established and governed the tiny colony of Plymouth. The Mayflower Compact established their local government and is considered one of the "foundation" documents of American democracy. Similarly, the Quakers, suffering persecution in England on even greater scale, crossed the ocean to set up a colony of basic religious freedom. The persecution enacted upon the English Quakers led to Penn's Charter of Privileges which is the earliest document advocating for religious freedom in America. The global tie between persecution in England and the birth of democracy and religious freedom in America is a clear one.

3. Annotated Bibliography

Coffey, John. *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689*. (Person Education Limited, 2000).

This book is very informative when studying persecution in England during the 16th and 17th centuries. It looks at the many groups that were persecuted, why they were persecuted, and how they were persecuted. The religious and political justifications for persecution are also covered as well as the ideas of toleration.

Weddle, M. *Walking in the Way of Peace*. (Oxford University Press, Inc., 2001)

The book explores the history of the Society of Friends. It focuses greatly on the ideals and ideas of the Quakers; ideals such as their belief in pacifism. The author shows the effects of the Quakers belief in pacifism from England to the New World, and examines how their beliefs, such as pacifism, led to their persecution not only in England but at the hands of the Puritans in the New England as well.

Kelso, Dorothy. "William Bradford." Retrieved from the Pilgrim Hall Museum. Plymouth, MA: www.pilgrimhall.org/bradfordwilliam.htm

This online resource provided by the Pilgrim Hall Museum tells the story of William Bradford and the Pilgrims. It also provides excerpts from his diary.

"The Mayflower Compact." Reproduced for the Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School. New Haven, CT: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp

The Avalon Project at Yale Law School provides valuable reproductions of documents relating to law, history, and diplomacy. This document is the first written framework of a democratic government in America.

Penn, William. "Charter of Privileges." Reproduced for the Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School. New Haven, CT: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pa07.asp

The Pennsylvania Charter of Privileges reproduced for the Avalon Project displays Pennsylvania's religious tolerance and freedom. The section for proclaiming religious freedom is also relevant, as it is listed number one in the charter.

Fox, George. "George Fox, An Autobiography." Reproduced by the Street Corner Society: <http://www.streccorsoc.org/gfox/title.html>

George Fox is viewed as the founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers). His journal reads like a story. It is a good resource when studying the Quaker origins and its rise. It is also helpful by providing vivid descriptions of acts of persecution against the founder, Fox.

Bradford, William. "History of Plymouth Plantation." Retrieved from Google Books:
http://books.google.com/books?id=BP94AAAAMAAJ&source=gb_s_navlinks_s

William Bradford was among those few on the Mayflower. This gives valuable first-hand knowledge of the Separatists (Pilgrims) in England, their journey, and the beginnings of Plymouth colony.

"America as a Religious Refuge: The Seventeenth Century." Retrieved from The Library of Congress website. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html>

This is an excellent resource for persecution. It gives general descriptions of the different groups being persecuted in Europe at the time as well as who was enacting the persecution. The site also contains many different primary source documents to help tell the different stories.

Wood, Gordon. *Radicalism of the American Revolution*. (Vintage Books, 1991)

The book provided some information on the set up of religions and religious hierarchies in England and the colonies. Its main focus is the how the ways the revolution changed society in America.

Brinkley, Alan. *The Unfinished Nation*. (The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 1997)

The book is a history of the United States. The information about the colonization of North America is a useful resource when researching this topic. It speaks on the different religions in England and how they were treated by the monarchy and the rest of society.