

John Woolman's Intersecting Testimonies against Enslavement, Colonialism and the Rum Trade

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Abstract

John Woolman built upon Quaker principles and earlier critiques by Friends in New Jersey and Pennsylvania to oppose enslavement and the rum trade among members of the Religious Society of Friends. By the 1760s, after the devastation of the Seven Years' War, he recognised how English colonisation had destroyed Native communities, linking colonialism with enslavement and rum. Woolman located these intersecting inequities in the focus of English families on acquiring and perpetuating wealth. Unlike his public testimony against involuntary bondage, his writings against colonialism in his journal and essay 'A Plea for the Poor' remained unpublished until after his death.

Keywords

Black people, colonialism, enslavement, Lenape people, Religious Society of Friends, John Woolman

John Woolman was a remarkable man who challenged injustice in many contexts from his home in Burlington County, New Jersey, to Pennsylvania, the Chesapeake, Carolinas, the West Indies and Great Britain. He awakened to the complexities of the Atlantic economy that implicated the harsh Caribbean sugar regimes and rum traders with expropriation of Native lands in eastern North America. In his last year, 1772, when Woolman took his antislavery message to Friends in England, he chose to travel in steerage, deploring the conditions of apprentice seamen, and avoided using English stagecoaches because they overworked men and horses.¹

1 My primary source for this paper is Moulton, P. P. (ed.), *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, which includes a full discussion of the editor's methodology in producing this scholarly edition. While less precise than Moulton's transcriptions, Gummere, A. M., *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, New York: Macmillan, 1922, provides papers by Woolman not included in Moulton's edition.

Woolman's opposition to enslavement is correctly viewed as his greatest work, as he proceeded from hesitant critic to forthright spokesman in undyed clothes. While less abrupt than his fellow abolitionist Benjamin Lay, Woolman insistently challenged Quaker colleagues, visiting the households of enslavers but refusing their hospitality unless he paid for labour performed by enslaved people. He provided his home for the Quaker wedding of a Black couple when the local Friends refused to offer the meeting house. Though Woolman found considerable support for abolition among fellow Quakers in New Jersey – where antislavery sentiment had coexisted since the 1670s with the importation of enslaved African and Native people – he recognised increasingly that unconventional methods were needed to disrupt comfortable thinking among his neighbours and fellow Friends.²

Woolman's broader critique of the Atlantic trading system, particularly his belief by the early 1760s that Delaware Valley colonists had destroyed Lenape communities and culture, remained unpublished until after his death. Prior to the outbreak of the Seven Years' War, he subscribed to the region's mythology that peaceful Lenape people welcomed the pacifist Quakers, accepting payment for territory that became New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Many colonists believed that God favoured the Friends, who took control as Lenape people succumbed to smallpox and other European diseases. On his trip to Wyalusing in 1763, however, Woolman comprehended the colonists' relentless push for Lenape land, identifying connections with the West Indian rum trade and enslavement. His insights cut to the heart of Delaware Valley economic and social structure: Woolman located the causes of and possible remedies for this injustice in the fixation of English colonists on their families and wealth. Rather than blaming a 'system' such as capitalism or an imperialist government, he believed the choices of individuals resulted in enslavement and colonialism. During his lifetime, Woolman worked to convince

For a more recent examination of Woolman's writings, see Kershner, J. R., 'The York Manuscript: John Woolman's final writings', *Quaker History* 102/2 (2013), pp. 28–51.

2 On Woolman's life and work as an abolitionist, see Drake, T. E., *Quakers and Slavery in America*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950; Davis, D. B., *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966; Soderlund, J. R., *Quakers and Slavery: a divided spirit*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985; Soderlund, J. R., 'African Americans and Native Americans in John Woolman's World', in Heller, M. (ed.), *The Tendering Presence: essays on John Woolman*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2003, pp. 148–66; Frost, J. W., 'John Woolman and the Enlightenment', in Heller, *Tendering Presence*, 167–89; Schopp, P. W., Nomination essay, John Woolman Memorial Association, National Register of Historic Places, sect. 8; Brown, C. L., *Moral Capital: foundations of British abolitionism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006, pp. 259, 396–97, 411–12, 419–22; Slaughter, T. P., *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2008; Plank, G., *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: a Quaker in the British empire*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012; Kershner, J. R., *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: a colonial Quaker's vision for the British Atlantic world*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

individual enslavers, especially Friends, to manumit enslaved people in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and other colonies. He found no similar opening to try to convince his neighbours to return Lenape lands. Indeed, after returning home from Wyalusing and writing his analysis in the manuscript journal and 'A Plea for the Poor', Woolman apparently took no further action to address the destructive impact of colonisation on the formerly sovereign Lenape people.³

Unlike other English colonies, where the enslavement of African and Native people flourished without controversy among European settlers, some founders of West New Jersey, the first Quaker colony in the Delaware Valley, opposed involuntary, perpetual bondage. During the 1670s, English Friends debated whether enslavement should be adopted in West New Jersey, initially omitting a legal framework for the practice. The Quaker leader George Fox and other missionaries visited the West Indies and eastern North America in 1671–73, so knew firsthand about the brutal labour system developing in the colonies. Fox reminded Quaker enslavers in Barbados 'that Christ dyed for all, ... for the Tawnes and for the Blacks, as well as for you that are called whites', recommended that Friends instruct enslaved people in Christianity and called for emancipation after a term of years. The Irish Quaker William Edmundson returned to Barbados and the mainland colonies in 1675, denouncing enslavement as contrary to Quaker beliefs. Fox, Edmundson and their fellow missionaries probably described the cruel conditions to Edward Byllynge, William Penn and other founders of West New Jersey who had not yet visited the West Indies or North America.⁴

3 The literature on the theory and perpetration of settler colonialism is extensive. Two sources that are particularly relevant to understanding the concept's relevance to Quaker colonisation in the Delaware Valley include Ostler, J., 'Locating Settler Colonialism in Early American History', *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. 76 (2019), pp. 443–50; Nielsen, M. O. and Heather, B. M., *Finding Right Relations: Quakers, Native Americans, and settler colonialism*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022. Among works emphasising the importance of family among Friends, see Frost, J. W., *The Quaker Family in Colonial America: a portrait of the Society of Friends*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973; Levy, B., 'The Birth of the "Modern Family" in Early America: Quaker and Anglican families in the Delaware Valley, Pennsylvania, 1681–1750', in Zuckerman, M. (ed.), *Friends and Neighbors: group life in America's first plural society*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982, pp. 26–64; Levy, B., *Quakers and the American Family: British settlement in the Delaware Valley*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; Angell, S. W., 'Early Quaker Women and the Testimony of the Family, 1652–1767', in Tarter, M. L. and Gill, C. (eds), *New Critical Studies on Early Quaker Women, 1650–1800*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 50–68; Lapsansky-Werner, E., 'Family, Unity, and Identity Formation: eighteenth-century Quaker community building', in Healey, R. R. (ed.), *Quakerism in the Atlantic World, 1690–1830*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021, pp. 152–75.

4 Fox, G., 'Gospel Family-Order, Being a Short Discourse Concerning the Ordering of Families, Both of Whites, Blacks and Indians (1676)', in Frost, J. W. (ed.), *The Quaker Origins of Antislavery*, Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1980, pp. 46–49; Edmundson, W., 'Letters (1676)', in Frost, *Quaker Origins*, pp. 66–68; Ingle, H. L., *First Among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 231–43;

While planning settlement of the area along the east bank of the Delaware River south of the Falls (now Trenton), Byllynge and his Quaker allies in England drafted a constitution entitled ‘The Concessions and Agreements of the Proprietors Freeholders and Inhabitants of the Province of West New Jersey in America’ (1676–77). Though scholars have appreciated its republican structure and protection of religious and civil liberties, the extent to which its drafters debated enslavement is less known. In considering whether the Concessions reflected antislavery sentiment, historians have focussed primarily on Chapter 23, which addresses the requirement for open court sessions, that ‘any person or persons inhabitants of the said Province may’ attend a trial, so ‘that Justice may not be done in a corner nor in any Covert manner’. The chapter continues:

(being intended and resolved by the help of the Lord and by these our Concessions and fundamentalls that all and every person and persons Inhabiting the said Province shall as farr as in us lies be free from oppression and slavery.⁵

Though the authors may have defined ‘oppression and slavery’ as the consequence of unjust trials and imprisonment of English people, additional evidence suggests that the authors compromised among themselves to craft a constitution that discouraged enslavement but fell short of banning the practice altogether. Some of the English Quaker leaders who had an impact on West New Jersey’s founding opposed enslavement, while others did not. A comparison of the section entitled ‘And that the Planting of the said Province may be the more speedily promoted’ of the Concessions of New Jersey (John Lord Berkeley and Sir George Carteret, 1665) with the similarly titled Chapter 4 of the West Jersey Concessions (1676–77) demonstrates careful omission of any reference to enslavement by the West New Jersey authors. Where the New Jersey Concessions of 1665 gave extra acreage to colonists who transported servants and enslaved people and excluded slaves from receiving freedom dues because they were subject to perpetual bondage, the West New Jersey Concessions mentioned only servants, not enslaved people. The prominent Rotterdam Friend Benjamin Furly later noted that the authors of the West New Jersey Concessions considered limiting the terms of enslaved people to eight years, which followed Fox’s advice against perpetual bondage. While some drafters of the West New Jersey Concessions, such as William Penn, kept a ban on enslavement out of the document, significant opposition to the practice existed among English and colonial Friends.⁶

Angell, S. W., ‘An Early Version of George Fox’s “Letter to the Governor of Barbados”’, *Quaker Studies* 19 (2015), pp. 277–94; Soderlund, J. R., *Separate Paths: Lenapes and colonists in West New Jersey*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022, pp. 53–54.

5 Dunn, M. M. and Dunn, R. S. (eds), *The Papers of William Penn*, 5 vols, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981–1987, vol. I, p. 399.

6 Leaming, A. and Spicer, J., *The Grants, Concessions, and Original Constitutions of the Province of New Jersey*, Somerville, NJ: Honeyman & Company, 2nd edn, 1881, pp. 20–21; Dunn and Dunn, *Papers of William Penn*, vol. I, pp. 391–92; Soderlund, *Separate Paths*,

As elsewhere in English North America during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, enslavement developed quickly in the Delaware Valley despite reservations among some Friends. By the 1680s, many wealthy Quakers and colonists of other religions in West New Jersey and Pennsylvania purchased enslaved people to labour on farms and in domestic work, crafts and trade. The 150 African people who arrived in Philadelphia on the ship *Isabella* in 1684 were sold within days to local residents. William Penn in 1685 instructed his plantation steward to purchase enslaved workers rather than indentured servants because they could be held for life. For Black people who had been kidnapped from their homes in Africa and were trapped in households of unsympathetic Quakers, enslavement in the Delaware Valley was brutal legally, socially and psychologically.⁷

In the early eighteenth century, enslaved Indigenous people from the Carolinas and enslaved African people contributed significantly to the region's labour force. In Burlington County, John Woolman's home county, by 1745 they composed 6.3 per cent of the population, compared with 7.5 per cent in New Jersey overall. Wealthy merchants and other residents of Burlington city purchased enslaved people to work in homes, shops, crafts and agriculture, while some of Woolman's affluent neighbours in Northampton Township and other rural areas followed suit. In 1713–14, the New Jersey assembly built upon earlier laws to enact a harsh slave code that remained law until the American Revolution. It limited rights to travel and conduct trade; established slave courts with broad powers to brutally punish enslaved people who were charged with murder, rape, arson and dismemberment; required a £200 bond for manumission (compared with £30 in Pennsylvania); and banned emancipated people from owning real estate.⁸

pp. 53–54. William Penn permitted enslavement to flourish in Pennsylvania and depended on the labour of enslaved workers at his Pennsbury estate. Dunn and Dunn, *Papers of William Penn*, vol. II, pp. 30, 235, vol. III, pp. 66–67, 256; Wood, N. P. and Soderlund, J. R., '“To Friends and All Whom It May Concerne”: William Southeby's rediscovered 1696 antislavery protest', *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 141 (2017), pp. 177–98; Plank, G., 'Discipline and Divinity: colonial Quakerism, Christianity, and 'heathenism' in the seventeenth century', *Church History* 85 (2016), pp. 519–28.

⁷ Dunn and Dunn, *Papers of William Penn*, vol. II, pp. 608–10, vol. III, pp. 66–67; Hodges, G. R., *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey 1613–1863*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999, pp. 44–45; Myers, A. C. (ed.), *Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey, and Delaware 1630–1707*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912, p. 325; Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery*, pp. 57–58, 63–65; Soderlund, *Separate Paths*, pp. 101–15.

⁸ Northampton Township, Burlington County, minutes, 1697–1803, photostatic copy, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Burlington County Probate Records, 1731–1750, New Jersey State Archives, Trenton; Greene, E. B. and Harrington, V. D., *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1932, pp. 109–11; Soderlund, 'African Americans and Native Americans', p. 152; Bush, B. (comp.), *Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey 1703–1745*, *New Jersey Archives* 3rd ser., Trenton: New Jersey State Library, Archives and History Bureau, 1977, vol. II, pp. 28–30,

In the face of the importation of enslaved people and this punitive regime, a number of Quakers issued tracts and spoke out against enslavement in New Jersey and Pennsylvania before 1740, including (among others) the Germantown Friends, William Southeby, Cadwalader Morgan, John Hepburn, John Farmer, Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay. These abolitionist proponents insisted that Quakers manumit the people they held in perpetual bondage, citing the numerous ways in which enslavement was inconsistent with Friends' principles of nonviolence, simplicity and the equality of everyone before God. Chester (Pennsylvania) Quarterly Meeting in 1729 called for a review of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting policy, which cautioned, but did not discipline, members who purchased enslaved people. The Yearly Meeting sent Chester's question to local meetings, whose responses indicated controversy rather than consensus. In New Jersey, the Shrewsbury and Gloucester-Salem Quarters supported Chester's proposal to place further restrictions on buying enslaved people. In Burlington Quarterly Meeting, however, Chesterfield Monthly Meeting opposed any change in the policy, blocking Burlington Quarter and the Yearly Meeting as a whole from accepting Chester's motion.⁹

John Woolman grew up in this social environment in which enslavement was an accepted practice protected by law yet controversial among Friends. By the 1740s, concern about its injustice started to take hold among Woolman's neighbours, as four of six enslavers who died in Northampton Township manumitted at least one person they held in bondage. Woolman's maternal grandfather, Henry Burr, in his

136–40; Minutes of Quarter Sessions Court, Salem County, Salem County Clerk's Office, Salem, NJ, 1706–1722, pp. 9, 12, 17, 21, 174, 194, 216–19.

⁹ Frost, *Quaker Origins*, pp. 131–32; Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery*, pp. 23–25; Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Men's) minutes, 7M 1729, 7M 1730; Salem Men's and Joint Meeting minutes, 1676–1827, 6M 1730; Chesterfield Monthly Meeting (Men's) minutes, 1684–1977, 6M 1730, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA. On the development of antislavery thought in the Delaware Valley in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, see Drake, *Quakers and Slavery*; Frost, *Quaker Origins*; Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery*; Nash, G. B. and Soderlund, J. R., *Freedom by Degrees: emancipation in Pennsylvania and its aftermath*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Rosenberg, P., 'Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth-Century Dimensions of Antislavery', *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. 61 (2004), pp. 609–42; Block, K., 'Cultivating Inner and Outer Plantations: property, industry, and slavery in early Quaker migration to the new world', *Early American Studies* 8 (2010), pp. 515–48; Gerbner, K., 'Antislavery in Print: the Germantown protest, the 'Exhortation', and the seventeenth-century Quaker debate on slavery', *Early American Studies* 9 (2011), pp. 552–75; Carey, B., *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker rhetoric and the birth of American antislavery, 1657–1781*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012; Sinha, M., *The Slave's Cause: a history of abolition*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016; Wood and Soderlund, 'To Friends', pp. 177–98; Rediker, M., *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: the Quaker dwarf who became the first revolutionary abolitionist*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017; Proud, J., *William Penn's 'Holy Experiment': Quaker truth in Pennsylvania, 1682–1781*, San Francisco, CA: Inner Light Books, 2019; Polgar, P. J., *Standard Bearers of Equality: America's first abolition movement*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

1742 will, manumitted the woman Maria, bequeathing to her a set of household goods and furniture, a cow and chickens. John Woolman served as a witness for Burr's will, while his father Samuel Woolman acted as executor. Though a large landholder, Samuel apparently was not an enslaver and he encouraged his son to publish the essay *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, drafted in 1746. At Samuel's death in 1750, he confided that 'I have all along been deeply affected with the oppression of the poor Negroes, and now at last my concern for them is as great as ever.'¹⁰

John Woolman thus had a foundation on which to help build the abolitionist movement among Friends. With persistence, he joined other reformers, such as Anthony Benezet, John Sykes, John Pemberton, John Churchman and Daniel Stanton, to convince Friends to prohibit members from trading, buying, selling and holding African and Native people as slaves. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting formed a committee, including Woolman, to visit Quaker enslavers within its purview; he also travelled alone or with other Friends to meetings in the South and New England. He purposefully served as an example, compensating enslaved workers or their enslavers for any services while staying at their homes, and adopted in the 1750s and early 1760s his increasingly strict testimony against dyes, sugar, molasses, rum and other produce of enslaved labour. With a combination of reasonable debate, idiosyncratic example and well-written essays, Woolman took leadership in moving Philadelphia Yearly Meeting toward its path-breaking 1774 and 1776 bans on buying, selling and holding enslaved people. Though he died of smallpox in 1772 while carrying his message against enslavement to Friends in England, Woolman's essays and the journal published in 1774 solidified his abolitionist legacy.¹¹

John Woolman's deep spirituality and travels opened his mind and heart to an understanding of the broad scope of injustice and exploitation that existed in his world (and continues to exist in ours). While focussed intellectually, morally and pragmatically on eradicating involuntary bondage, he recorded in his journal other ways in which people were oppressed and separated from God. On his 1772 voyage to England, for instance, Woolman bunked in steerage, where he was appalled by the working conditions and immorality of sailors' lives, with special concern about the impact on apprentices. Woolman tried to convince the seamen to reform, 'but their minds have appeared to be so deeply impressed with that almost universal depravity amongst sailors' that he reflected upon the prophet Jeremiah's report about the sinful people of Jerusalem, 'There is no hope

10 Burlington County Probate Records, 1731–1750; Soderlund, 'African Americans and Native Americans', pp. 152–53; Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, pp. 44–45.

11 Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*; Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery*, pp. 26–31, 87–111; Slaughter, *Beautiful Soul*; Plank, *John Woolman's Path*; Holcomb, J. L., *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the transatlantic boycott of the slave labor economy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016, pp. 13–15, 26–36, 70–73.

[Jer. 18:12].¹² In England, Woolman refused to travel on stagecoaches or use their services for correspondence because they ‘frequently go upwards of a hundred miles in 24 hours, and I have heard Friends say in several places that it is common for horses to be killed with hard driving’ and for post boys to work long hours, even all night in cold weather. ‘So great is the hurry in the spirit of this world’, he concluded, ‘that in aiming to do business quick and to gain wealth the creation at this day doth loudly groan!’¹³

Woolman’s testimony against colonialism met a very different fate from his effort to convince Philadelphia Yearly Meeting members to emancipate enslaved people. His insights about the intersection of enslavement, the expropriation of Indigenous lands and the rum trade struck at the core of the Atlantic economic system, challenging not only enslavers and merchants of African and Native people but rum producers, fur traders, European settlers and land speculators. Woolman reached his conclusions after the outbreak of the Seven Years’ War, expressing them in his journal during his 1763 trip to Wyalusing, on the east branch of the Susquehanna River in northern Pennsylvania. At this time he also drafted the essay ‘A Plea for the Poor or A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich’. His journal was published in 1774, two years after his death, while ‘A Plea for the Poor’ received Quaker permission for publication in 1793.¹⁴

With his analysis of intersecting oppressions under colonialism, Woolman confronted the Delaware Valley mythology that pacifist Quaker colonists had treated the Lenape people fairly in purchasing their land and transforming the region into an English countryside. Friends believed that God favoured their settlement, striking down the Lenape people with disease because, as heathens, they fell outside God’s protection. Quaker propagandists also claimed that the Indigenous people increased their mortality by drinking alcohol. While, during the seventeenth century, the West New Jersey and Pennsylvania colonists avoided the kind of confrontations that resulted in war in New England, New Netherland and the Chesapeake, they rejected opportunities to reside among Lenape people. The Quaker settlers ignored the invitation of Lenape leaders, publicised by Thomas Budd in 1685, to live together as brothers, establishing ‘a broad Path for you and us to walk in’. Instead, the settlers expected the Lenape people to leave their homeland, interpreting the epidemics as God’s will that the newcomers should take control. As Friends bought up rich agricultural lands along the Delaware River, Lenape people moved their towns to the heads of streams, where

12 Journal, in Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, pp. 166–80 (quotation on p. 170); Plank, *John Woolman’s Path*, pp. 175–98.

13 Journal, in Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, p. 183; Plank, *John Woolman’s Path*, pp. 190, 205.

14 Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*; Plank, *John Woolman’s Path*, pp. 156–57, 232, 280n35, 281n53; Slaughter, *Beautiful Soul*, pp. 149–50, 269–71.

many continued to live in New Jersey despite counter claims to the land by the colonial government.¹⁵

John Woolman accepted the Delaware Valley's creation myth in his essay *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (1754), published prior to the Seven Years' War. Woolman wrote,

He that sleeps not by day nor night hath watched over us and kept us as the apple of his eye. His almighty arm hath been round about us and saved us from dangers. The wilderness and solitary deserts in which our fathers passed the days of their pilgrimage are now turned into pleasant fields. The natives are gone from before us, and we establish peaceably in the possession of the land, enjoying our civil and religious liberties. And while many parts of the world have groaned under the heavy calamities of war, our habitation remains quiet and our land fruitful.¹⁶

Woolman's views had changed by the winter of 1762, however, when he sought Friends' permission to visit the Munsee leader Papunhank, whom he had met in 1761 at Anthony Benezet's house in Philadelphia. Papunhank had expressed affinity for Quaker principles, including pacifism, and attended Quaker meetings for worship. Papunhank and Woolman discussed religion and 'the Cause of the frequent Warrs & Bloodshed which so much prevailed in the World'. According to Woolman, the Munsee leader 'said That Men not keeping to that love which our Maker had given us in Our Hearts, the evil Spirits gets possession there'. Papunhank explained, eloquently,

That it was not good to Speak upon of matters Relating to the Almighty only from the root of the tongue outward but that in order so that their words should be good they must Come from the good in the heart.¹⁷

Indeed, on 12 June 1763, as rain halted progress on his journey to Wyalusing, Woolman considered his reasons for visiting Papunhank's town. Woolman believed that 'Love was the first motion', but wanted

to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them.¹⁸

15 Budd, T., *Good Order Established in Pennsylvania & New-Jersey in America*, 1685, pp. 32–33.

16 *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, p. 207.

17 John Woolman, 'The Substance of some Conversation', Pemberton Papers, vol. XIII, p. 23, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, pp. 137–44, 158–68; Plank, G., 'Quakers, Indigenous Americans, and the Landscape of Peace', in Healey, *Quakerism in the Atlantic World*, pp. 179–99; Batchelor, R., "'Cast under Our Care": elite Quaker masculinity and political rhetoric about American Indians in the age of revolutions', in Gallup-Diaz, I. and Plank, G. (eds), *Quakers and Native Americans*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, pp. 75–92.

18 *Journal*, in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, p. 127.

Woolman hoped to continue the conversation that he, Benezet and other Friends had had with Papunhank in Philadelphia, valuing the opportunity to pursue with the Munsee leader common beliefs in peace, reciprocity and the individual's communion with God.

From 1754 – perhaps during conversations with Papunhank and other Native people – Woolman came to understand ‘the alterations of the circumstances of the natives of this land since the coming in of the English’. As he travelled on 13 June 1763, he realised that the Lenape, Munsee and other Indigenous nations had been pushed back from the seacoast to where they had ‘to pass over mountains, swamps, and barren deserts, where travelling is very troublesome, in bringing their skins and furs to trade with us’. They had ‘in some places, for trifling considerations, sold their inheritance so favourably situated, and in other places been driven back by superior force’. Woolman now acknowledged that his people – New Jersey and Pennsylvania Quakers – had expropriated the fertile Lenape lands ‘near the sea [that] are conveniently situated for fishing’ and where ‘the running of the tides makes passing up and down easy with any kind of traffic’. In addition, by ‘the extending of English settlements and partly by English hunters’, the Native people had more difficulty in hunting deer and other animals. Colonial fur traders exacerbated the situation by making extra profits with exchange of liquor for skins, ‘which tends to the ruin of [Native hunters] and their families’.¹⁹

Woolman's concern about the impact of rum and the rum trade on Native communities connected his continuing testimony against enslavement with his more recent awareness of injustice toward Native people. He wrote in his journal,

I had a prospect of the English along the coast for upward of nine hundred miles where I have travelled. And the favourable situation of the English and the difficulties attending the natives in many places, and the Negroes, were open before me. And a weighty and heavenly care came over my mind, and love filled my heart toward all mankind, in which I felt a strong engagement that we might be obedient to the Lord while in tender mercies he is yet calling to us, and so attend to pure universal righteousness as to give no just cause of offense to the Gentiles, who do not profess Christianity, whether the blacks from Africa or the native inhabitants of this continent.²⁰

Woolman identified several ways in which he as an individual and his fellow colonists should address this inequity. He wrote, first, that he personally should keep ‘clear from all things which tended to stir up or were connected with wars, either in this land or Africa’, including use of goods such as rum and sugar produced by enslaved people in the West Indies. But he also believed ‘that the prosperous, convenient situation of the English requires a constant attention to divine love and wisdom’. He understood that ‘luxury and covetousness, with the numerous oppressions and other evils attending them’ led to war: ‘I felt in that

19 Journal, in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, p. 128.

20 Journal, in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, pp. 128–29.

which is immutable that the seeds of great calamity and desolation are sown and growing fast on this continent.²¹

As with his opposition to enslavement, Woolman built his testimony about alcohol on Quaker principles, but moved beyond Friends' concerns that stressed its impact on the actions of individual colonists and Lenape people. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting had long advised members to avoid excess use of spirits, as monthly meetings disciplined Friends for habitual drunkenness or in connection with other unwelcome behaviour. In addition, county courts in the Delaware Valley, dominated by Friends, punished residents for excessive drinking and enforced laws regulating distribution such as running an unlicensed or disorderly tavern.²²

Early West New Jersey leaders, who were predominately Quakers, became preoccupied with alcohol sales to Lenape people, enacting a series of laws to prohibit the practice while at the same time exchanging barrels of rum, brandy and beer for Native territory.²³ The Burlington court, in June 1680, declared that anyone who 'shall hereafter directly or indirectly sell any Rumme or other strong liquor to any Indian or Indians either by great or small measure without order from the Court' be fined 50 shillings. They then changed the law in August 1680 to ban all liquor sales under a half anchor (about five gallons) to Lenape residents, but permitted merchants to sell Lenape people more than a half anchor if they took

speciall care that such Indian and Indians as shall buy the same Liquors in manner aforesaid shall speedily depart with the same Liquors apart into the Woods to drinke the same there; that soe the people may not bee disturbed by them.

The court supported the merchants' trade while trying to separate the Native people from European settlements.²⁴

In November 1681, the newly elected West New Jersey assembly imposed a

21 Journal, in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, p. 129.

22 Marietta, J. D., *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748–1783*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, pp. 19–21; Offutt, W. M. Jr., *Of 'Good Laws' and 'Good Men': law and society in the Delaware Valley, 1680–1710*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995, p. 192.

23 For discussion of issues related to alcohol, epidemics, and expropriation of Native lands, see Mancall, P. C., "'The Bewitching Tyranny of Custom": The social costs of Indian drinking in colonial America', *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17 (1993), pp. 15–42; Mancall, P. C., *Deadly Medicine: Indians and alcohol in early America*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995; Salinger, S. V., *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, pp. 27–28, 99–101; Jones, D. S., 'Virgin Soils Revisited', *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. 60 (2003), pp. 703–42; and Goode, M., 'Dangerous Spirits: how the Indian critique of alcohol shaped eighteenth-century Quaker revivalism', *Early American Studies* 14 (2016), pp. 258–83.

24 Reed, H. C. and Miller, G. J. (eds), *The Burlington Court Book: a record of Quaker jurisprudence in West New Jersey 1680–1709*, Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1944, pp. 2–3.

£3 fine for selling ‘any strong liquors to any Indian or Indians’, then in May 1682 amended the law to impose a fine of £5 for ‘every foreigner that shall so offend’. After a decade, the assembly enacted new legislation because ‘there hath been many abuses committed by permitting of rum to be sold to Indians, and notwithstanding of the laws formerly made to suppress the same’. This time they set a £5 fine for ‘selling or giving of rum, or any manner of strong liquor’ to an African American or Lenape individual. The legislators allowed, however, ‘a moderate giving’ to an enslaved person ‘for necessary support of nature, or to an Indian in a fainting condition’.²⁵ Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which met alternately in Burlington and Philadelphia from 1685 to 1760, similarly opposed the sale of rum or other liquors to Native people. Indeed, in 1691, the women’s Yearly Meeting announced this prohibition as its first policy directive, instructing monthly meetings to report on ‘friends order as to the Indians that they should not give them any Strong Liquor to their hurt’.²⁶

As part of their creation story, Delaware Valley Quakers constructed a narrative about Lenape people and alcohol to help justify the ravages of European settlement. Friends suggested that a lack of discipline and addiction to rum, rather than European diseases and colonisation, led to deaths and the destruction of Lenape towns. Quaker leaders publicised threats to peaceful relations as the result of young Lenape men drinking alcohol. Through laws and propaganda, the settlers created a stereotype diverting blame for the decline of Lenape communities from land expropriation and epidemic disease to drinking rum. Quakers exploited the myth that Indigenous people were more susceptible to drunkenness than the colonists, while their negotiators offered gallons of alcohol at treaty conferences in return for rights to land. The three 1677 West New Jersey treaties for territory along the east bank of the Delaware River, for example, provided a total of 20 anchors (200 gallons) of brandy and rum along with many other goods. In 1688 and 1693, negotiators for proprietors Daniel Coxe and the West New Jersey Society also presented gallons of rum and beer. The large quantity of alcohol in some of the treaty documents – along with the many tools and other manufactured items – suggests that the Lenape leaders intended to trade the goods with Native people elsewhere in North America.²⁷

By the 1760s, when John Woolman developed his critique of the Atlantic trading system connecting enslavement, expropriation of Native land and the rum trade, rum importation from the West Indies and local manufacture from imported molasses were big business for Delaware Valley colonists. In the late

25 Leaming and Spicer, *Grants, Concessions*, pp. 435, 445, 451, 512–13.

26 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Men’s) Minutes, 1681–1746, 7M 1685, 7M 1686, 7M 1687; Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Women’s) Minutes, 1681–1742, 7M 1691; Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 1704 Book of Discipline, Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford College, Haverford, PA.

27 Soderlund, *Separate Paths*, pp. 73–78; West Jersey Deeds, Book B, Part 1, pp. 3–4, Book B, pp. 202–03, 325, New Jersey State Archives.

1760s and early 1770s, Philadelphia merchants imported annually nearly 900,000 gallons of rum, while 16 local distilleries used a large part of the imported 600,000 gallons of West Indies molasses to manufacture the spirit. In 1770, in the British North American colonies overall, importers in port cities supplemented their incomes with rum distilleries that produced approximately five million gallons of rum, equaling about 60 per cent of rum sold in the colonies. Woolman had decided by late 1755 to stop selling products such as rum, molasses, tobacco and coffee that were linked to enslavement, and instead shifted his work more exclusively to tailoring plain clothes. Refusing to sell rum, molasses and tobacco became part of his more comprehensive testimony to avoid goods produced by enslaved labourers, such as his decision to wear undyed clothes.²⁸

In his essay 'A Plea for the Poor', Woolman moved beyond the myth of the Natives' unique susceptibility to alcohol. He offered a socioeconomic analysis of inequity as well as practical approaches to address the use of the rum trade to oppress enslaved labourers in the West Indies and to expropriate Native lands. Woolman built upon his insight in the manuscript journal that the colonists had taken the most fertile and convenient lands near the seacoast of the Lenape people, made their hunting and fishing more difficult and undermined Lenape families by exchanging liquor for furs.

Woolman noted in chapter 12 of 'A Plea for the Poor' that the Native people of North America initially welcomed English immigrants who left their 'thick-settled' homeland for new opportunities. Indigenous people valued trade for tools and other goods, so allowed the newcomers to settle. Problems arose because the English took up more and more land, establishing large farms rather than building more compact settlements. The colonists ignored the needs of 'the offspring of those ancient possessors of the country', which meant that 'their way of life, requiring much room, hath been transmitted to them from their predecessors and probably settled by the custom of a great many ages'. Woolman concluded that the colonists must settle more compactly,

so as to accommodate the greatest number of people it is capable of, before we have any right to plead, as members of the one great family, the equity of their assigning to us more of their possessions and living in a way requiring less room.

He strongly urged his readers to stop trading locally grown produce for 'strong drink, such costly array, and other luxuries' that were unnecessary, and instead focus labour on 'husbandry and useful trades', which would allow many more people to 'live comfortably on the lands already granted us by these ancient

28 Doerflinger, T. M., *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: merchants and economic development in revolutionary Philadelphia*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p. 209; McCusker, J. J. and Menard, R. R., *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985, pp. 290–91; Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, pp. 79–80.

possessors of the country'.²⁹ Woolman underscored his belief that affluent families violated God's will by indulging in luxuries and alcohol, thus depriving others of their autonomy and land. We should 'meditate on the privileges of his children', Woolman wrote,

to remember that where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty, and that in joining to customs which we know are wrong, there is a departing from the purity of his government and a certain degree of alienation from him. To lay aside curious, costly attire, and use that only which is plain and serviceable, to cease from all superfluities and too much strong drink, are agreeable to the doctrines of our blessed Redeemer.³⁰

In chapter 13 of 'A Plea for the Poor', Woolman explored the origins of inequality in a way that distinguished European colonial societies from Native communities, without specifically labelling the groups. He established that the 'first people who inhabited the earth' received possession equally from God to benefit from its fruits. Inequitable distribution of land and its produce violates 'the instructions of the great proprietor of the earth', who remains the absolute owner of the world that 'he first formed ... out of nothing'. Woolman thus ignored the claims of English royalty to land in North America by divine right, through which they had granted charters to the West New Jersey Proprietors, William Penn and other colonial leaders. Woolman's perspective came closer to that of the Lenape people, who held territory as a community, not as individuals. They worshipped the Creator, *Këtanëtuwit*, who helped them benefit from the animals, plants and other resources of their homeland. When the colonists first arrived, the Lenape people, like other Indigenous nations, expected to share these fruits with the newcomers, not sell their land.³¹

Woolman further challenged the English notion of 'right' as it pertained to possessions such as 'a *right* of propriety to such a dividend of a province'³² or a clear, indisputable *right* to the land within such certain bounds'. Woolman understood that

this word is continued as a remembrancer of the original intent of dividing the land by boundaries, and implies that it was designed to be equitably or rightly divided, to be divided according to righteousness If we trace an unrighteous claim and find gifts or grants to be proved by sufficient seals and witnesses, this

29 'A Plea for the Poor', in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, pp. 257–58.

30 'A Plea for the Poor', in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, p. 259.

31 'A Plea for the Poor', in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, pp. 260–61; Soderlund, *Separate Paths*, pp. 11–29.

32 Woolman here refers to the specific way in which West New Jersey proprietors purchased shares of the colony rather than specific acreages. The proprietors could then sell portions of their shares to other colonists. Soderlund, *Separate Paths*, pp. 51–52, 64–73.

gives not the claimant a *right*, for that which is opposite to righteousness is wrong, and the nature of it must be changed before it can be *right*.³³

To explain, Woolman then hypothesised how injustice had developed from God's equal division of the world among people. The Quaker minister proposed an example in which 20 free Christian men and their wives settled a vacant island, which they divided equally and improved. At their deaths, 19 of the men bequeathed equal shares to their sons, while one settler left 'the chief of his lands' to a favourite son 'by an instrument sufficiently witnessed' to impose 'his mind and will'. This son became the landlord over his brothers and nephews, who consequently paid him some of their produce to support his elevated lifestyle of large buildings, decorations, carriages, expensive food, clothing and furniture, 'all suiting that distinction lately arisen between him and the other inhabitants'. He then assumed power, while 'plain, honest men who are zealous for equitable establishments' found it difficult to oppose him. Over generations, his descendants similarly favoured one son, resulting in a single wealthy landlord and many poor, oppressed people in this twentieth part of the island. Despite 'instruments strongly drawn and witnessed', Woolman reasoned, 'after all we could not admit a belief into our hearts that he had a *right* to so great a portion of land, after such a numerous increase of inhabitants'. God had given the original 20 men equal shares of the island, then 'gave being to numerous people who inhabited this twentieth part'. As God's creatures, they 'had a *right* to part of what this great claimer held, though they had no instruments to confirm their *right*'.³⁴

Woolman's analysis of the origins of inequality was rooted in Quakerism, as he emphasised God's will, simplicity and the importance of loving relationships and reciprocity within families and the larger community. Yet his explication of the word 'right' suggests Woolman's understanding of Native perspectives of English colonialism. Where many colonists presumed that Lenape leaders transferred territorial rights absolutely under English law, Lenape people expected to share the land and its resources. Instead, the European settlers amassed huge acreages of prime land as Indigenous residents died from European diseases. While Delaware Valley Quaker colonists generally avoided primogeniture, affluent Friends accumulated large estates for distribution to sons.³⁵ Like the Lenape people, Woolman questioned the colonists' insistence that a legal document,

33 'A Plea for the Poor', in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, p. 261.

34 'A Plea for the Poor', in Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, pp. 261–62.

35 Levy, 'Birth of the "Modern Family"', pp. 26–64; Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*. On Woolman's critique of families and wealth see Levy, *Quakers and the American Family*, pp. 256–62; Graves, M. P., "'A Perfect Redemption from this Spirit of Oppression': John Woolman's hopeful world view in 'A Plea for the Poor'", in Heller, *Tendering Presence*, pp. 219–39; Lacey, P. A., 'Answerable to the Design of Our Creation: teaching "A Plea for the Poor"', in Heller, *Tendering Presence*, pp. 295–307.

whether a will or treaty, conveyed the right to land if it resulted in expropriation and inequity.

With this hypothetical island Woolman brought together his teachings against excess, colonialism, enslavement and war. As in his published essays against enslavement, he located within the family both the causes of and possible solutions for inequality and oppression in the Anglo-American economic system. The failure of affluent families to follow God's mandate for universal love resulted in unfair labour practices and enslavement, the expropriation of Native land and further entrenchment of this injustice with the purchase of West Indies sugar and rum, fancy clothes and luxurious furniture and homes. As an individual, Woolman had taken significant steps to oppose enslavement and avoid goods produced by enslaved people. He engaged in dialogue to learn from the Munsee leader Papunhank and other leaders. As far as we know, Woolman made no significant effort to publish 'A Plea for the Poor', perhaps because friends with whom he shared it considered the essay inflammatory. Despite pacifist beliefs, Delaware Valley Quaker families had prospered through colonisation and the Atlantic trading system. While Woolman, Benezet and other abolitionists successfully convinced Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to ban enslavement, Woolman's analysis in his journal and 'A Plea for the Poor' went much further, to critique the foundations of their social and economic system, and ours.

Author details

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