

LESSON PLAN ON GENDER AND THE DORR REBELLION

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Grade Levels: 10-12

Time Period: 80 minute block

Dorr Liberation Society.
This Society is persevering in their efforts to carry the case of this State, against Gov. DORR, by writ of Error, to the Supreme Court of the United States. The Society have issued a Scrip called the 'DORR Liberation Stock,' being Certificates for defraying the expenses of the defence of the suit of Gov. Dorr. The Scrip bears an impress from a Daguerreotype-likeness of Gov. Dorr, and is offered in sums of ten cents, and one dollar, and may be had of the officers of the Society. The friends of that persecuted and suffering man are respectfully invited to buy the Stock in such sums as they may choose,—pay for it as they take it, and become venders of it on their own account, for the benefit of innocence and adversity struggling with arbitrary power.
Mrs A H LORD, President,
Mrs J C DAVIS, Vice President,
L J FOLLETT, Recording Secretary,
M J DINSMORE, Corresponding do,
WILBER WHEATON, Treasurer,
STEPHEN C. KENYON, Surety.
Stock for sale at Mr Henry Lord's, Dean street;
Doct. Davis', corner Clifford and Eddy sts; Wilber Wheaton's, corner Dean and Federal sts; and at the People's store, No. 28 North Main st. d19

Fig. 1 Dorr Liberation Newspaper Announcement

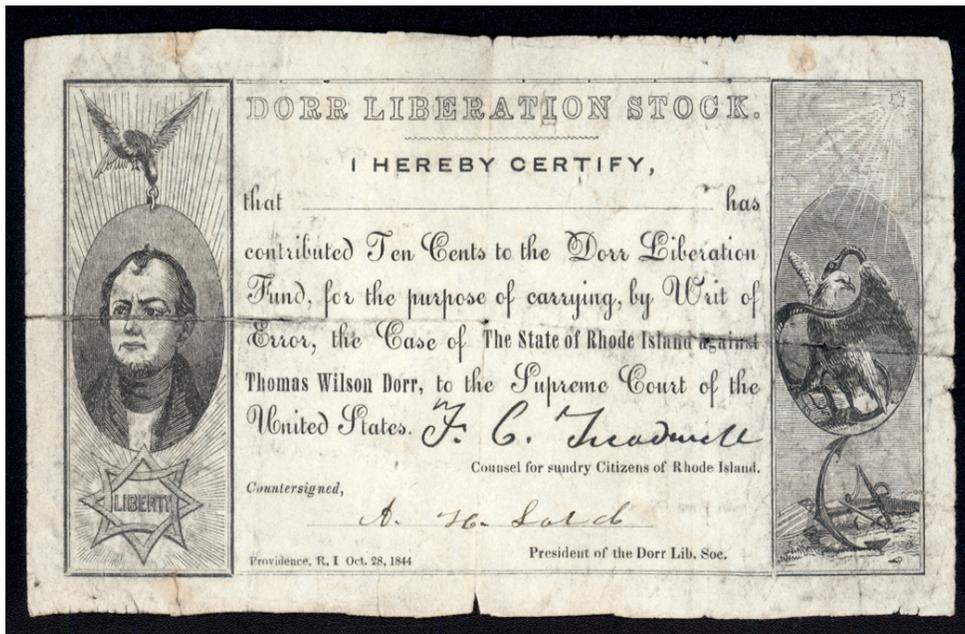


Fig. 2. Dorr Liberation Stock countersigned by Mrs. Abby Lord

Subject Areas

- History and Social Studies > U.S. > AP U.S. History
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Politics and Citizenship
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Reform
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Gender

Rhode Island GSEs

- HP 1-1; HP 1-2; HP 1-3; HP 2-1; HP 2-2; HP 2-3
- C&G 1-1; C&G 1-2; C&G 3-2

Skills:

- Critical analysis
- Critical thinking
- Discussion
- Evaluating arguments
- Historical analysis
- Online research
- Using primary sources
- Writing skills

Overview of the Dorr Rebellion:

In 1842 Rhode Island was torn between rival governors, separate legislative assemblies, warring militias, and two competing visions of the nature of American constitutionalism. One vision held that a majority of the people possessed the right to alter or abolish their system of government, regardless of procedures provided by the existing government; the other was predicated on the rule of law and the belief that a government could only be amended through prescribed legal means.

Although relatively obscure to most Americans and many historians, Thomas Wilson Dorr's attempt at extralegal reform involved nothing less than "the fate of written constitutions," to borrow a phrase from Alabama Congressman Dixon Lewis. The rebellion was the most important domestic crisis of John Tyler's presidency. In addition, both houses of Congress and the federal judiciary weighed in on the controversy.

On one side of the Rhode Island constitutional divide stood the People's Governor, Thomas Wilson Dorr, whose reform effort was predicated on the belief that the people possessed an inherent right, as Thomas Jefferson noted in the Declaration of

Independence, to revise their constitutions whenever they chose. Dorr urged his followers not to rely on the court system for a redress of their grievances. He asked, what if the "judges should decide that the People in a state have no right to alter or amend their institutions, without the authority of the legislature." An adverse decision would "abrogate the Declaration of Independence and the American system." On the other side stood the aptly named Law and Order Party, or the "legal party," as it was known in conservative circles.

The legally-elected governor, Samuel Ward King, and the General Assembly did not recognize the new constitution, and they took action to protect their hold on governmental power. The state Supreme Court issued an advisory opinion in March that declared the People's constitution illegal and said any attempt to enforce it would be considered an act of treason. Governor King sought a commitment of military support from President John Tyler. Shortly after his election as the "People's Governor" in April, Dorr left Rhode Island to journey to Washington, D.C. to try to plea his case to the President. Unfortunately for Dorr, Tyler did not consider him to be the true governor of Rhode Island.

Events quickly assumed a more ominous cast. The Charter government enacted a law on April 2 making it a treasonable offense, punishable by life imprisonment, to support or to participate in the government of the People's Constitution. To the Dorrites this statute confirmed the illegitimacy of the establish government, and they labeled it the "Algerine law" after the corrupt regimes of North Africa. On May 17, Dorr wrote a letter to Maine Governor John Fairfield asking him to bring the "Rhode Island Question" before the Maine legislature in order to solicit support for the reform cause. A majority report delivered by a special committee formed to review the struggle in Rhode Island concluded that "when it is manifest, to the general government, that an absolute majority of the whole people of any state in the Union have, in any manner, deliberately abolished their form of government, and instituted a new one that is not inconsistent with the constitution of the United States, it is the duty of the general government to recognize the authorities established under it." In his letter to Fairfield, Dorr dwelled at length on the illegal conduct of President John Tyler. Dorr was adamant that the domestic insurrection clause in the Constitution (Article IV, section 4) could not be applied to the People's Government because it was a just and "peaceful" assemblage.

Dorr changed his mind quickly on this last point because on the night of May 17, a band of Dorrites trained several cannon on the state arsenal in Providence, where a large contingent of Rhode Island militia were stationed. Dorr's brothers, Sullivan and Henry Dorr, his uncle, Crawford Allen, and his brother-in-law, Samuel Ames, who all disagreed with the young Dorr's resort to violence, were inside. Thankfully the cannons never fired because a light rain prevented Dorr's men from lighting the cords. The Dorrites were finally defeated one month later in Chepachet in northern Rhode Island. Dorr fled to New Hampshire where he resided under the protection of Democratic Governor Henry Hubbard until late March 1843.

While in exile Rhode Island women picked up the torch of reform and kept the cause alive. Dorr returned to Rhode Island in October 1843 and gave himself up to the Charter authorities at the office of the *Republican Herald* newspaper. Before a hostile court, he was put on trial for treason against the state in April 1844. The trial lasted several weeks, but in the end Dorr was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. A Dorr Liberation Society headed by female Dorrites advocated for Dorr's release from the state prison in Providence. Quickly, people across the nation who were sympathetic to his cause began clamoring for Dorr's release from the state prison in Providence. The northern Democratic tagline for the 1844 Presidential Election was "Polk, Dallas, and the Liberation of Dorr." In June 1845, exactly one year to the day after Dorr entered the state prison in Providence, he was freed.

Dorrite women were active throughout the suffrage movement having formed Lady Dorrite Circles throughout the state in 1841; following the events at Chepachet in June 1842 women played a more active role and during the efforts to release Dorr from prison in 1844 and 1845 women once again were active, having formed a Dorr Liberation Society that was headed by all women officers (see the two images above). From the formation of female suffrage associations to the planning, coordination and execution of suffrage events, these women took leadership roles in the suffrage movement. Some ladies like Ann Parlin took on a public persona, speaking at meetings with predominantly male audiences (a very rare occurrence in mid-nineteenth century America) and she even offered to lead a female militia company; other ladies like Catharine Williams and Harriet Whipple took a less public role preferring instead to use their pens. Their private correspondence to suffrage leaders helped keep the suffrage party together while their public correspondence consisted of published letters in newspapers and even a written history of the rebellion helped to counter the anti-suffrage sentiments found in the Law and Order press. Forged through necessity because their male counterparts were in exile, prison or quieted by the oppressive tactics of the Law and Order government, these women found their political voice and led the state through its difficult passage to suffrage reform well before the events at Seneca Falls in 1848 called for a national women's suffrage movement and a female role in government.

Guiding Questions:

1. Why do you think women emerged as the leaders of the suffrage cause in the wake of Thomas Dorr's retreat from Chepachet in late June 1842?
2. Did the female Dorrites argue for suffrage for men and women? Why or why not?

Preparation Instructions:

- Students should read historian Ronald Formisano's informative 1993 essay, "[The Role of Women in the Dorr Rebellion](#)" for homework, keeping the guiding questions above in mind as they read. (Note: the article begins on page 22 of the PDF available at the link provided).
- Instructor should print out the letter from [six suffrage women to Gov. Cleveland of Connecticut](#) that accompanies this lesson. It will be used in Activity #4.

Lesson Activities (80 minute block):

- Activity #1: Lecture: Overview of the Dorr Rebellion (10 minutes)
Using the information in this lesson plan provide a brief overview for students on the 1842 Dorr Rebellion.
- Activity #2: Documentary Viewing (20 minutes)
Present the 19 minute documentary film on the Dorr Rebellion:
<http://library.providence.edu/dps/projects/dorr/index.html>
(Note: If you have already adopted Lesson #1 for classroom use this activity should be skipped.)
- Activity #3: Discussion of Reading (25 minutes)
Discuss Formisano's article as a large group.
Then, break students into smaller groups to discuss and answer the following questions:
 1. Who were Angelina and Sarah Grimke?
 2. Why does Formisano focus so much on the presidential election of 1840?
 3. What were some of the rumors that were circulating amongst Providence's elite in May-June 1842?
 4. What did many women loyal to Thomas Dorr form in the summer of 1842?
 5. Why? What role did clambakes play?
 6. In what ways were the activities of abolitionist women and Dorrite women similar?
 7. Who was Ann Parlin?
- Activity #4: Analyzing Correspondence (25 minutes)
Break students into small groups. Each group should read and analyze the letter from the [six female Dorrites to Connecticut Governor Chauncey Cleveland](#) and answer the following questions:

1. Based on the [Formisano essay](#) what social class do you think the women who signed the letter were from?
2. Do these women appear to have an understanding of the issues raised by the Dorr Rebellion? How do they relate these issues to some of the ideas of the founders of the country?
3. While the authors of the letter refer to their fathers, husbands and brothers, do you think when they use the phrase "all men are born free and equal" they believe that women were included as well? And if not why?

Extending the Lesson:

Have students compare the female Dorrites to the delegates to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention.

The Declaration of Sentiments from Seneca Falls is available here:

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/senecafalls.asp>

A link to a speech by Elizabeth Cady Stanton is available here:

<http://ecssba.rutgers.edu/docs/ecswoman1.html>