

LESSON PLAN #VI - Pamphlet Literature

[Guide to Lesson Plan VI →](#)

Authors: Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone

Grade Levels: 10-12

Time Period: 80 minute block

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 > Slavery
- History and Social Studies > Themes > U.S. Constitution

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
- Interpretation
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions
- Online research
- Representing ideas and information orally, graphically and in writing
- Using primary sources
- Writing skills

Introduction:

The American Revolution had shattered the old European tradition of hereditary preferment and inequality. Most of the revolutionary generation were cautious about the amount of change they wanted to introduce, but they could not contain the Revolution's momentum. The forces unleashed in 1775-76 tore away at legal preferment and elevated the principle of equality. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson eloquently phrased the hope his generation had for an egalitarian future: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." What was missing was a definition of equality and a prescription for what policies would produce and sustain that condition. After the War of 1812, the ideals of democracy and equality began to blossom in the United States, gradually at first as women, immigrants and blacks were still precluded but over time democracy would expand to include a greater portion of the populace. In its wake came modern democratic politics, a rhetoric based on equality of citizens and a widespread assault on all forms of legal favoritism — a time historians have characterized as the "Age of Jacksonian Democracy" and the "Rise of the Common Man." Thomas Wilson Dorr (1805-1854) was a political reformer who came of age during the democratization of American politics, the time when egalitarianism became a national creed.

The political question that prompted Thomas Dorr to resort to extralegal measures involved the continued reliance on the 1663 royal charter as the state's governing document. As John Quincy Adams noted in his diary on May 10, 1842, the Dorrises had taken steps to "achieve a revolution in government" because the state still "adhered" to the colonial charter. Rhode Island's 1663 colonial charter contained no amendment procedure, which meant petitioning the General Assembly was the only available recourse for reform. The charter restricted suffrage to those men possessing \$134 of real estate (figure set in 1798), thereby disfranchising most of the population of the commercial and manufacturing districts. As the Rhode Island economy shifted to manufacturing in the early nineteenth century and the number of urban workers grew, the disenfranchised saw the freehold suffrage requirement as an undemocratic relic of colonial times. The factory population around Providence and along the Pawtucket and Blackstone Rivers presented a stark picture of legislative malapportionment, for example the southern agricultural town of Jamestown with a population of 365 in 1840 had the same number of representatives to the General Assembly as the northern industrial town of Smithfield with a population of 9,534. Since the General Assembly was elected by wealthy landowners, they proved unwilling to take any action on behalf of the growing Irish Catholic and, indeed, landless workforce in the cities. After several attempts at change were rebuffed, the working people of Rhode Island organized the Rhode Island Suffrage Association — a conglomerate of urban Democrats and reform-minded Whigs. Dorr, a member of one of Rhode Island's most influential families, eventually assumed leadership of the association.

This lesson plan will examine the origins of the 1842 Dorr Rebellion in Rhode Island. Students will read multiple letters written by Thomas Wilson Dorr, watch a short documentary on the rebellion, and read a broad overview article by historian Patrick T. Conley. Through a process of reading, classroom discussion and analysis students should come to understand the issues that limited suffrage, and a system of fixed apportionment under the Royal Charter of 1663 had upon industrial 19th century Rhode Island.

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, elected under the People's Constitution on April 18, 1842 and 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 and its governor Samuel Ward King, elected on April 20, 1842.

Guiding Questions to think about before embarking on the lesson: 1.

Why was Rhode Island so far behind other states in terms of reforming its governing structure? 2. What role did the ideology of the American Revolution play in the 1842 Dorr Rebellion?

Preparation Instructions: Students should watch the documentary on the Dorr Rebellion Project Site for homework (<http://library.providence.edu/dps/projects/dorr/index.php>) and familiarize themselves with the People's Constitution (<http://library.providence.edu/dps/projects/dorr/pcon.php>)

Lesson Activities: Students will need access to a laptop or tablet in order to download the “Nine Lawyers Opinion” & “To the Members of the General Assembly”:
http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/dorr_pamphlets/

Divide the class into four groups. Two groups will work on the “Nine Lawyers Opinion” & two groups will work on “To the Members of the General Assembly.”

Note: Please direct students to start on p.68 of the “Nine Lawyers Opinion” pamphlet.

Overall Guide Questions for Pamphlets: How did the Dorrites and the Law and Order Party justify their course of actions? How did both sides understand the legacy of the American Revolution? What authorities do both sides cite in order to bolster their cause? Why do you think they selected these authorities? Can you make any connections to previous periods in U.S. History that you have already covered?

Extending the Lesson:

Direct students to the Thomas Wilson Dorr and John Brown Francis Letters on the Dorr Rebellion Project Site: <http://library.providence.edu:8080/xtf/search?browse-all=yes>

Students should be asked to find Thomas Wilson Dorr to John Quincy Adams (October 22, 1841) and William Gibbs to John Brown Francis (March 11, 1842). After the students have read through the letters they should write a paragraph reflecting on the content. In the paragraph students should try to make connections to the pamphlets they have just read. For example, does William Gibbs’ letter to former governor John Brown Francis support the views outlined in the Nine Lawyers Opinion or John Pitman’s “To the General Assembly”? Students should offer specific rationale in their responses. An option for a longer writing assignment would be to analyze the arguments in the Nine Lawyers’ Opinion and compare with Job Durfee’s Charge to the Bristol Grand Jury.