

LESSON PLAN ON THE ORIGINS OF THE 1842 DORR REBELLION

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Grade Levels: 10-12

Time Period: 80 minute block

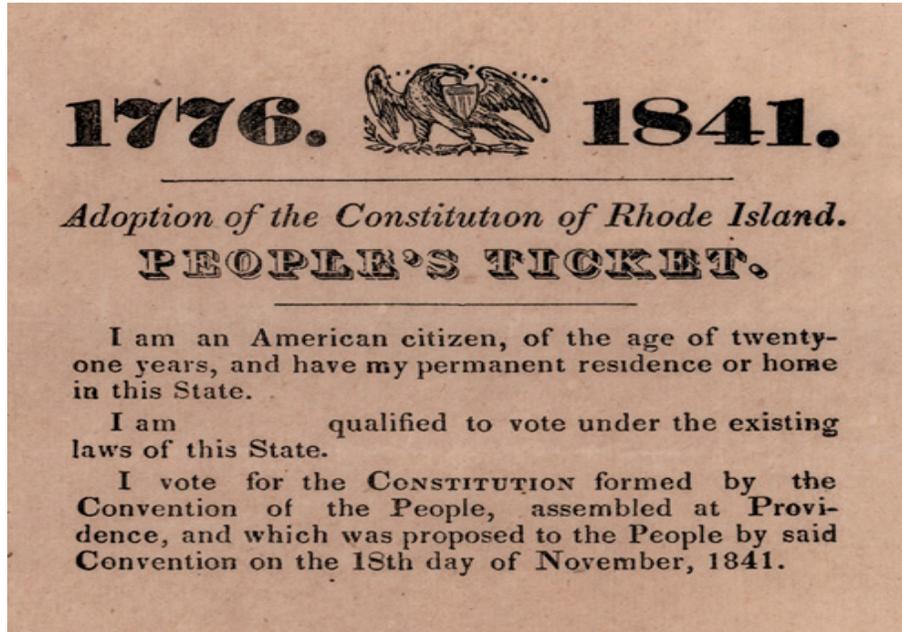


Fig. 1 Election Ticket for the adoption of the Peoples's Constitution

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 Dorrites 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:

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:

- **Homework:**

Prior to the lesson, students should read "[Popular Sovereignty of Public Anarchy? American Debates on the Dorr Rebellion](#)" by historian Patrick T. Conley.

Homework Questions:

- What is the definition of "popular sovereignty"?
See
http://library.providence.edu/dps/projects/dorr/images/doctrine_full.jpg for Thomas Dorr's definition.
 - If popular sovereignty was legitimate then was the Algerine Law illegal?
 - Why were southern Democrats against popular sovereignty?
- To teach this lesson teachers and students will need laptops with Wi-Fi capability. Students will visit the Dorr Rebellion website:
<http://library.providence.edu/dps/projects/dorr/index.html>

Lesson Activities (80 minute block):

- Activity #1: Discussion (15 minutes)
Begin class with a discussion on [the Conley article](#) that students read for homework.
- 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>
- Activity #3: Document-Based Discussion (15 minutes)
The Dorr Rebellion web site contains an image gallery that hosts a variety of primary source materials. Students can explore the resources within the gallery. Then, as a class, focus on the following resources:

Political Ribbons

- What do the ribbons tell us about the political reform movement in Rhode Island?
- Discuss the slogans on these ribbons and how they harken back to the American Revolution.

Election Ticket

- Why did the reformers invoke the American Revolution?
- Activity #4: Analyzing Correspondence (30 minutes)
This portion of the lesson asks students to review, discuss, and collaboratively analyze a series of [letters](#) hosted on the [Dorr Rebellion web site](#).

Break the class into three groups (A, B, and C) and introduce the class to the [Dorr Letters site](#).

Group A will read and analyze the letter from [William Wheaton to Thomas Dorr](#) dated May 1, 1834.

Group B will read and analyze the letter from [Thomas Dorr to Amos Kendall](#) dated September 24, 1840.

Group C will read and analyze the letter from [Thomas Dorr to John Quincy Adams](#) dated October 22, 1841 .

The groups should collaboratively read and analyze their letter. Each group member should then read the introduction, the body of the letter, and the questions that follow the letter. Encourage students to click on the letter to enlarge it on the screen. Students should attempt to read the original manuscript letter but if they have difficulty deciphering the handwriting a transcription is provided. One group member should record the question(s) and her group's response on the board.

Finally, based on this and the other activities in the lesson, ask each group to brainstorm and share what they believe were the main factors that led to the Dorr Rebellion.

Extending the Lesson:

Students should read the letter from [Henry Dorr to Thomas Wilson Dorr](#) dated June 1841 for homework and answer the two questions at the end of the letter.