

## LESSON PLAN ON THE 1842 DORR REBELION

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Grade Levels: 10-12

Time Period: 80 minute block

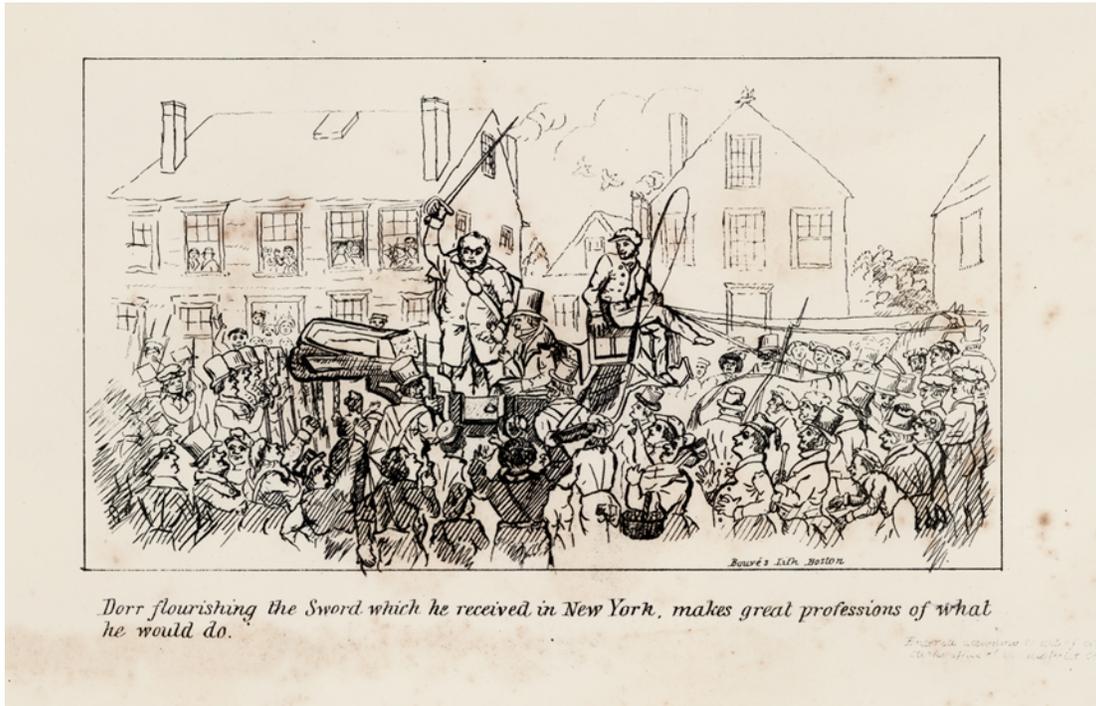


Fig. 1 The People's Governor delivers a fiery speech in front of his headquarters denoting a shift from peaceful reformer to militant

### 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
- 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 as the Charter government enacted a law on April 2 making it a treasonable offense, punishable by life imprisonment, to support or 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.

**Guiding Questions:**

1. Why do you think Rhode Island's Royal Charter of 1663 was no longer adequate in 1842?
2. What did Thomas Dorr and the Suffrage Association accomplish with the People's Constitution?
3. Do you think Thomas Dorr's resort to arms was justified?

**Preparation Instructions:**

- 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: 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 #2: Document-Based Discussion: the People's Constitution (10 minutes)  
The Dorr Rebellion web site hosts digital facsimiles of the People's Constitution and the Landholder's Constitution.

Show the students [the People's Constitution](#) and emphasize Article II "Of Electors and the Right of Suffrage."

- Activity #3: Document-Based Discussion: Scenes from Rhode Island (10 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, discuss and analyze:

### [Scenes from Rhode Island](#)

These scenes depict Dorr's fiery speech in front of his headquarters and his subsequent attack on the state arsenal. Guide student discussion toward an exploration of Dorr's shift from peaceful reformer to militant.

- Activity #4: Analyzing Correspondence (40 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 [Thomas Wilson Dorr to Walter Burges](#), May 12, 1842.

Group B will read and analyze the letter from [Samuel Wales and others to Thomas Dorr](#), May 18, 1842.

Group C will read and analyze the letter from [Samuel Man to James Simmons](#), May 16, 1842.

Group D will read and analyze [Thomas Wilson Dorr's editorial on the People's Constitution](#), July 184.

Group E will read and analyze the letter from [Thomas Wilson Dorr to Chauncey Cleveland](#), May 13, 1842.

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, list, and share what they believe to be the timeline of events in the Dorr Rebellion.

**Extending the Lesson:**

Students should be read the article "[Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island](#)" by historians Erik Chaput and Russell DeSimone

- Homework Questions:
  1. What role did the issue of race play in the Dorr Rebellion?
  2. Why did black Rhode Islanders initially link themselves with the Suffrage Association?
  3. Why were their hopes dashed? What role did black Rhode Islanders play in putting down Thomas Dorr's rebellion?