



__Pacifists' Appeals in the American Revolution__

While pacifist religious groups strove to live separately and peacefully in the American colonies—as depicted in the pastoral scene above—their principled opposition to war and bearing arms would be harshly challenged during the Revolutionary War, despite official proclamations urging tolerance (see illus., pp. 3 & 5). These selections from pacifists' records, letters, and addresses (all but one from Pennsylvania) represent their appeals to civil authority and to each other for tolerance and understanding.

MENNONITES & BRETHREN (German Baptists, "Dunkers")

In a "short and sincere Declaration" to the Pennsylvania assembly in November 1775, leaders of two pacifist sects expressed gratitude to the assembly for recognizing their principled opposition to war and bearing arms, and affirmed their willingness to aid the distressed—implying the aid would not be supportive of the war effort in any way.¹ [See Continental Congress statement, p. 5.]

The Advice to those who do not find Freedom of Conscience to take up Arms, that they ought to be helpful to those who are in Need and distressed Circumstances we receive with Cheerfulness towards all Men of what Station they may be — it being our Principle to feed the Hungry and give the Thirsty Drink. — We have dedicated ourselves to serve all Men in every Thing that can be helpful to the Preservation of Men's Lives but we find no Freedom in giving or doing, or assisting, in any thing by which Men's Lives are destroyed or hurt. — We beg the Patience of all those who believe we err in this Point.

We are always ready, according to CHRIST's Command to *Peter*, to pay the Tribute, that we may offend no Man, and so we are willing to pay Taxes, *and to render unto Caesar those Things that are Caesar's, and to God those Things that are God's,*² although we think ourselves very weak to GOD his due Honor, he being a Spirit and Life, and we only Dust and Ashes. . . .

This Testimony we lay down before our worthy Assembly, and all other Persons in Government, letting them know that we are thankful as above-mentioned, and that we are not at Liberty in Conscience to take up Arms to conquer our Enemies, but rather to pray to GOD, who has Power in Heaven and Earth, for *US* and *THEM*.

A short and sincere DECLARATION,
To our Honorable Assembly, and all others in high or low Station of Administration, and to all Friends and Inhabitants of this Country, to whose Sight this may come, be they ENGLISH or GERMANS.

¹ Library Company of Philadelphia, in *Early American Imprints*, American Antiquarian Society with Readex/Newsbank, Doc. 14256; reproduced by permission.

² New Testament, Matthew 22:21.

**RELIGIOUS
SOCIETY OF
FRIENDS**
(Quakers) 1775

Alarmed by the imminence of war, Pennsylvania Quaker leaders addressed the colonial assembly in early 1775, urging the body to disavow all resistance to the king and, if war were to break out, to guarantee the Quakers' liberty of conscience as pacifists. During the war, however, although official attempts were made to protect Quakers and other pacifists from retribution for their views (see pp. 3 & 5, bottom), many were shunned, harassed, imprisoned, and deprived of their property and civil rights.³

Having considered, with real sorrow, the unhappy contest between the Legislature of Great Britain and the people of these colonies, and the animosities consequent therein, we have by repeated public advices and private admonitions, used our endeavors to dissuade the members of our religious society from joining with the public resolutions promoted and entered into by some of the people, which, as we apprehended, so we now find, have increased contention, and produced great discord and confusion.

The Divine Principle of grace and truth which we profess, leads all who attend to its dictates to demean themselves as peaceable subjects, and to discountenance and avoid every measure tending to excite disaffection to the king as supreme magistrate, or to the legal authority of his government; to which purpose many of the late political writings and addresses to the people appearing to be calculated, we are led by a sense of duty to declare our entire disapprobation of them—their spirit and temper being not only contrary to the nature and precepts of the gospel, but destructive of the peace and harmony of civil society, disqualifies men in these times of difficulty for the wise and judicious consideration and promoting of such measures as would be most effectual for reconciling differences or obtaining the redress of grievances.

From our past experience of the clemency of the king and his royal ancestors, we have grounds to hope and believe that decent and respectful addresses from those who are vested with legal authority, representing the prevailing dissatisfactions and the cause of them, would avail toward obtaining relief, ascertaining and establishing the just rights of the people, and restoring the public tranquillity; and we deeply lament that contrary modes of proceeding have been pursued, which have involved the colonies in confusion, appear likely to produce violence and bloodshed, and threaten the subversion of the constitutional government, and of that liberty of conscience for the enjoyment of which our ancestors were induced to encounter the manifold dangers and difficulties of crossing the seas and of settling in the wilderness.

We are therefore incited, by a sincere concern for the peace and welfare of our country, publicly to declare against every usurpation of power and authority in opposition to the laws and government, and against all combinations, insurrections, conspiracies, and illegal assemblies; and as we are restrained from them by the conscientious discharge of our duty to Almighty God, “by whom kings reign and princes decree justice,”⁴ we hope, through his assistance and favor, to be enabled to maintain our testimony against any requisitions which may be made of us, inconsistent with our religious principles, and the fidelity we owe to the King and his government, as by law established; earnestly desiring the restoration of that harmony and concord which have heretofore united the people of these provinces, and been attended by the divine blessing on their labors.

Having witnessed with sorrow the conflict between Parliament and the American colonists, and among the colonists themselves, we have tried to dissuade our fellow Quakers from becoming involved in the discord.

As our religious principles lead us to live peaceably and to discourage any disloyalty to the king and the British government, such as seen in recent declarations, we feel a sense of duty to declare our complete disapproval of them as contrary to the Gospel and destructive of peace and of the willingness to strive for the peaceful settlement of conflicts.

From our experience with Britain (since the founding of Pennsylvania by Quakers), we believe that official and respectful statements of grievances will be effective in restoring colonists' rights, and we fear that disruptive protests are “likely to produce violence” and jeopardize the “liberty of conscience” for which our ancestors came to Pennsylvania.

We must therefore publicly declare our opposition to unlawful resistance to our British colonial government, and to any associations planning rebellion, as we are led by God's law to obey his ordained governmental authorities, and we hope, with God's help, to maintain our religious principles by resisting any future orders inconsistent with them.

³ “The Testimony of the people called Quakers, given forth by a Meeting of the Representatives of said people, in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, held at Philadelphia the 24th Day of the First Month, 1775,” *Rivington's New-York Gazetteer*, 2 February 1775; America's Historical Newspapers, courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society with Readex/Newsbank.

⁴ Old Testament, Proverbs 8:15.

**RELIGIOUS
SOCIETY OF
FRIENDS**
(Quakers) 1778-79

The minutes of the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting, the governing body of the Pennsylvania Quakers, reveal the struggles of committed members to “maintain our Christian testimony against joining with or supporting the spirit of wars and fightings,” struggles intensified by the 1777 militia act that required military service and support for the army. But what actions comprised *support* for the war effort? Could one grind grain or make carriage wheels for the army? If one were fined for refusing to serve, would paying the fine be contributing to the war?⁵

Notwithstanding I have had a right of membership among the people called Quakers, but not enough regarding the principle of Truth in my own heart, have so far erred as to join with military preparations so far as to make wheels for cannon carriages, after being advised to the contrary, it being inconsistent with the principles professed by me; for which error I am heartily sorry, and do condemn the same, and desire Friends to continue me under their care, hoping for the future to be more careful.

18th of ninth month, 1777 A— S— Kennet Monthly Meeting

Dear Friends — Whereas I have paid a fine imposed on me for not appearing in a militant order with Andrew Tranburg and company, for which act of so doing I have received considerable condemnation, and am sensible that it is not consistent with the Christian life to do so; therefore, for the clearing of Truth and my own conscience, I thus give my testimony against that misstep, and hope for the future to keep nearer the spirit of Truth, that leads, and not astray. I am your friend,

[1778] I— H— Wilmington Monthly Meeting

We find in several different quarters [regions] a religious scruple hath appeared and increases among Friends against the payment of taxes imposed for the purpose of carrying on the present war, they being deeply concerned and engaged faithfully to maintain our Christian testimony against joining with or supporting the spirit of wars and fightings, which hath remarkably tended to unite us in a deep sympathy with the seed of life in their hearts.

[1778] Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, to individual meetings (congregations)

We are desirous and earnestly recommend that Friends in every quarter [region] be encouraged to attend to their tender scruples against contributing to the promotion of war by grinding of grain, feeding of cattle, or selling their property for the use of the army, or other such warlike purposes.

And that, in Christian love and tenderness, advice should be extended to such [Friends] who have deviated or are in danger of deviating from the testimony of Truth in these respects, in order that a united concern and labor may be manifested for the advancement of the peaceable kingdom, and our preservation in that bond of brotherly love which cements and unites the true followers of Christ.

[1779] Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, to individual meetings (congregations)

Broadside distributed by the Philadelphia Committee of Safety urging citizens to refrain from “any kind of insult” to Quakers who, on religious principles, would keep their businesses open on official days of fasting and prayer or God’s support in the war for independence. Many Quakers felt that closing their businesses on fast days would be a tacit endorsement of the war that violated their pacifist beliefs.

American Antiquarian Society

In Committee Chamber, May 16. 1776.

THE COMMITTEE of the City and Liberties of Philadelphia. See taking into their consideration the case of a number of their fellow citizens, of the people, called Quakers, who will probably not observe the FAST recommended by CONGRESS; but, (according to the practice of their forefathers) follow their respective occupations as on other days. This Committee hold *Liberty of Conscience* to be sacred, and that any differences in opinion, which are not injurious to the community, ought to be indulged.

We, therefore, do earnestly recommend to all the Inhabitants of this City and Liberties to forbear from any kind of insult to the said people, or any others who may, from conscientious scruples, or from a regard to their religious professions, refuse to keep the said Fast.

By Order of the Committee, R. STRETTELL JONES, Secretary.

⁵ Ezra Michener, *A Retrospect of Early Quakerism: Being Extracts from the Records of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting* (Philadelphia: 1860), pp. 301-303.

MORAVIANS
(United Brethren)
1778

Many pacifist sects consider civil oaths (as in swearing to tell the truth to a court) as a violation of God's law.⁶ For Pennsylvania pacifists like Quakers and Moravians, their refusal to take the required oath of allegiance to the Patriot cause brought harsh consequences. These letters among Moravian clergymen in Pennsylvania in 1778 spotlight the intricate personal process of appealing for tolerance to the Pennsylvania assembly.⁷ [See oath of allegiance, p. 7.]

____ Letter of Rev. Christian Heckewelder, Moravian minister visiting Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to Rev. John Michael Graff, Wachovia, North Carolina, 1 October 1778, EXCERPT. Bethlehem and Wachovia were Moravian settlements.

. . . Br[other] Matthaëus . . . knew that on Friday the 18th the Justices would be in Bethlehem to administer the oath [of allegiance] to all Brethren who were willing. Nothing happened because none of the Brethren consented to take it, though the Justices were there promptly on time. I rejoice in the unity of the Brethren, and their steadfastness is surprising.

On the 22nd Br. Franz Böhler and 12 of his Emaus Brethren passed through here on their way to the Easton jail, having been summoned thither because of their refusal to take the oath. The twelve, however, partly on account of rough treatment, and partly on account of their families, grew weak and faint-hearted, took the Oath, and left their leader, Br. Böhler, alone in prison. Later however, he was released, the required security of £400 [400 English pounds] having been given the jailer and Fuller by him, and he was ordered to appear at the next Court. Br. Böhler is quite cheerful, and rejoices that he now knows what his value is. A number of Mennonites in Sackona [Saucon] were shamefully treated because they would take not this oath.

The Brethren are planning to send another Petition to the Assembly, which will meet in three weeks, and would like me to wait and see the result, as without it I could bring back no definite answer. . . .

There are many things happening in the land. The English are said to have landed 7/M [7,000] men at Hackinsack [New Jersey], and to have moved toward Morristown, presumably to destroy the Continental stores [supplies] in that neighborhood. . . . At present our army is beyond North River and has probably gone to New England, perhaps to secure Burgoyne's prisoners.⁸

Hardly anyone gets the newspapers now, otherwise I would enclose one; perhaps I can send one or two before I return.

____ Letter of Rev. Johannes Etwein, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to Rev. John Michael Graff, Wachovia, North Carolina, 16 November 1778, EXCERPTS. The "Test Act" was the law requiring all white men to take an oath of allegiance to the Patriot cause.

I am asked to inform you what we think about your situation and affairs, but it is hard to advise you. Like you we have been placed in a difficult position by the Test Acts, so that He alone has been our protection and help and He alone has stopped those who wished to injure us. How we have fared and in what way we have been helped you will hear from our reports. Our greatest danger in these hard times was the evil partisan spirit which threatened to divide us; Brethren so affected are always more dangerous and harmful to a congregation than is the rough world. . . .

I went to see him [Henry Laurens, president of the Continental Congress], told him about your petition and the result, and that we could not take the oath against the king on account of our mission service and our connection with the European congregations. He said that he could understand the force of the argument, and when he heard that in spite of this we were willing to promise faithfulness to the State, and for the defense of the State instead of giving personal [military] service we were willing to pay what we were asked, he became quite friendly, but would not promise to speak for us at the next Assembly where he would be present. He said he wanted to think it over for if he promised something he kept his word, etc.

On the 7th of November the president [Laurens] asked me to dinner and he brought Col. Williams⁹ along from Congress in order, he told me, to tell him in my presence his views about the Brethren. This

⁶ See, in the New Testament, Matthew 5:34-37, and James 5:12.

⁷ "Three Letters Written at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1778," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 36:3 (1912), pp. 293-302.

⁸ John Burgoyne, British general.

⁹ John Williams, delegate to the Continental Congress from North Carolina, 1778-1779.

he did so kindly, forcibly and to the point, that I would not have dared to say half as much. Williams opposed him several times, but he insisted that it would be unjust, impolitic and injurious to the country if the Assembly should persecute and disturb the Brethren. Williams admitted that they had been very useful to the country and that the country needed them, but he feared that they who loved the Old Government might by and by influence men against the New.

I said this would be against the faithfulness promised to the State, and when I was alone with him he excused himself and said that he had opposed the president only in order to find out his real opinion, and that he would do in the Assembly everything he could for the Brethren.

They should again send a brother with a memorial [petition] to the Assembly, he should come to him and he would present him to such men as had the greatest influence in the House. He advised me also to speak with Mr. Harnet,¹⁰ who would also be present at the next Assembly. I called on him on the 9th (he was in Bethlehem a year ago). I found him in the first interview very severe. He said why should we have more liberty than he had himself? [He said] we just wanted to secure our estates [protect our property] in case the opposite party [British] should win [and that] we had proved in the Indian war that we were not opposed to self-defense, etc. When I answered his arguments he said he was speaking as did the people who were against us, that he himself had always taken the side of the Brethren in the Assembly, that he had high regard for the Brethren and knew that they were of benefit to the country but that they had more enemies than they knew and that there were many who wanted their land, etc. At his request I went to see him once more. He seemed to be more moderate and said among other things that the Brethren were hated by their neighbors because they were too religious and too industrious to suit them. He promised to all in his power to prevent the Brethren from being troubled, and said that he would write to the Governor at once.

I told him that if the Brethren should be persecuted on account of the Test and forced to leave their State, they should at least be given a reasonably long time in which to look for a home in a quiet town in another State, that the delegates from S. Carolina, Virginia, New York and Massachusetts have invited us and promised us all possible freedom — he said this would surely not be necessary. But it may be that the gentlemen will insist upon the form proposed by the Senate and that loyalty to the King must be renounced so long as a man remains in the State (if the State maintain its independence, and to doubt this is considered by these men a great political crime). Should this be insisted on, then we can do nothing but leave it simply with each one to act as his heart dictates, all do not think alike; but to be moved by fear of man or other worldly consideration to act contrary to conscience, that we could never advise.

American Antiquarian Society

As there are some people, who from religious principles cannot bear arms in any case, this Congress intend no violence to their consciences, but earnestly recommend it to them to contribute liberally, in this time of universal calamity, to the relief of their distressed brethren in the several colonies, and to do all other services to their oppressed country, which they can consistently with their religious principles.

As there are some people, who from religious principles cannot bear arms in any case, this Congress intend no violence to their consciences, but earnestly recommend it to them to contribute liberally, in this time of universal calamity, to the relief of their distressed brethren in the several colonies, and to do all other services to their oppressed country, which they can consistently with their religious principles.

Second Continental Congress, committee report on "putting the militia into a proper state for the defense of America," 18 July 1775

¹⁰ Cornelius Harnett, delegate to the Continental Congress from North Carolina, 1777-1779.

SCHWENK- FELDERS 1777

With the Pennsylvania Militia Act of June 1777, many pacifist sects suffered increasing harassment. Christopher Schultz, a minister of the Schwenkfelders, a German pietist sect, sent an appeal to a friend in the assembly after his cousin was imprisoned, and travelled to Philadelphia the next day to make a personal appeal. A few days later his cousin was released.¹⁰

Hereford [Pennsylvania], 12 August 1777

My dear old Friend Sebastian,

For some time it has often been in my mind that I ought in writing to remind you of a few necessary points, since for a long time we have been upright friends so far as I know in order that I, on my part, may fulfill the duties of true friendship . . . receive therefore what is held before you mirrorlike in the following lines as coming from an old friend out of a sorrowing heart.

I wish to speak with you as with a member of a House which gives laws to the citizens of a once-free Pennsylvania and also, without taking counsel of their consciences, forces these laws upon the said inhabitants by force of arms, fines, imprisonments, exclusion from all civil rights as the recent Test Act and the proceedings against innocent conscientious people with us here shows. . . .

Since you indeed know quite well that Pennsylvania was originally the property (both in regard to the land as to the right of government) of those people [Quakers] who on account of scruples of conscience have misgivings against killing other people, and . . . as you at the same time know that of these people a large number are still here and constitute a great part of the most respectable, the well-established, and irreproachable citizens. A necessary question when one considers your acts [laws] and feels how they are applied is this: — Have you in your hearts at any time put yourself in the place of these people and viewed and represented their matters of conscience as your own? Or is it not shown that you consider them the most worthless sweepings which you wish to suppress to the utmost and crowd out of the land?

If this is not the case, why is my cousin George Kriebel imprisoned in the Easton jail and must let himself be told that if he does not swear the way you want him to [take the oath of allegiance], he cannot be set free until his own [family] are delivered to his enemies with abandonment of all his property. Why do you rob us of all civil liberty and freedom of conscience in so much that we are to hold nothing as our own, we are not allowed to trade on God's earth, or more about or even to live — merely because we take into consideration what may be helpful to the rest and peace of our souls and minds, because we are unwilling to take oath concerning things that are of the utmost uncertainty whether we can remain true to the same and yet we are to bind ourselves by oath. This is the sum of the whole matter that you expect things of us in this respect and impose them upon us with loss of all that one holds dear in the world, things that no tyrant nor tartar nor turk,¹² much less a Christian government in former times demanded, namely that in the midst of the hottest warfare and before the conclusion of the matter, a former lord is to be denied under oath. Consider the history of former times and you will not be able to show a like tyranny over conscience. If action indeed was necessary with respect to spies, traitors or the like malefactors as the preamble of your Test Act declares, why do you implicate innocent people in their punishment? Or where is he who can justly accuse us of such things? Let him step forth. Have we not always been willing to bear our full proportion of the public burdens as far as might be done conscientiously, that is without preparation for manslaughter? Why is it that you are continually speaking of fines, or that what is demanded of us must be paid under the name "fine"? Are you here our true representatives?

O my dear friend! I beseech you for God's sake, consider while it is yet time. You may indeed now think you are a nice friend that you come to me with such uncivil questions. But, but you will indeed not escape, and I heartily wish for the sake of your soul that it may not be too late, that you will have to answer dearly before Him before whom we must all render account, whether you have oppressed God's own who place their hope and trust in Him, who are afraid to offend Him and who fear his word.

Concerning the Test Act, experience and sentiment show that by it door and gate are opened wide to all manner of vanity, robbery, iniquity and mischief to carry out the same on quiet, innocent,

¹¹ Howard Wiegner Kriebel, *The Schwenkfelders in Pennsylvania: A Historical Sketch* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania-German Society, 1904), Appendix A, pp. 207-219 (original German text included).

¹² Tartar and Turk: referring to Central and Near Asian groups of the time ruled by harsh autocratic leaders.

conscientious people without fear or shame in this our worthy land, yea, several of the executives of the laws publicly encourage in such conduct those who with them are equally inclined to wrongdoing. May God have mercy and restrain the iniquity. Shall not the government here take the place of God in whom virtue is well-pleasing and all vice an abomination? Yea, is it not established to protect the good and to punish the evil? For this their souls will be called to account at the great day in all strictness by Him who is the judge of the whole world in righteousness.

. . . Everyone may beat, scourge, deride, abuse us as Satan can inspire him, and we shall receive from the present government no help nor protection other than that we are placed in secure imprisonment, there to languish. And all this because we will not by public oath or its substitute promise or vow that which we do not know whether we are able to fulfill and hence cannot be done without pollution of conscience.

O consider these things and for God's sake reflect what you have done and change it before the hand of the Highest overtakes you and fearlessly punishes you. Were I even to lose my own, I would not for ten such rich estates as yours be partaker in these unrighteous actions. Tomorrow I shall go to Philadelphia to see whether from that quarter restraint of this iniquity may be had, for thus we cannot live. In the meantime I wished in this way to call your attention to these things. If you think I have erred in any respect in friendliness, show me what is better and I shall accept it in love.

I remain your friend and well wisher, CHR. SCHULTZ [delivered by messenger David Meschter]

We, the subscribers [signers], do swear (or affirm), that we renounce and refuse all allegiance to George the Third, King of Great Britain, his heirs and successors, and that we will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as a free and independent State, and that we will not, at any time, do or cause to be done, any matter or thing that will be prejudicial or injurious to the freedom and independence thereof, as declared by Congress, and, also, that we will discover, and make known to some justice of the peace of the said State, all treasons and traitorous conspiracies which we now know, or hereafter shall know, to be formed against this or any of the United States of America.

Oath required in Pennsylvania Act of Allegiance (Test Act), 1777

SANDEMANIANS 1776

Eleazer Russell, the first postmaster of New Hampshire, was a member of the Sandemanians, a small Scottish Protestant sect with pacifist beliefs. In 1776 he wrote to the town Committee of Safety explaining his reluctance to sign the required oath of allegiance, the "association test."¹²

17 August 1776

On the 4th day of May last, Col. Wentworth, of the Committee for the Town of Portsmouth, brought me the Association to Subscribe [the oath to sign], At a time I was so ill as to be incapable of anything. Upon growing better, I thought largely of the matter, and, finding my mind perplex'd, he consented to lay [present my appeal] before the Honorable Committee of Safety. . . .

It was, and is, merely to secure the morality of my mind that I was reluctant to put my name to it — Solemnly to bind myself to the performance of what nature & necessity rendered impossible, I started at the thought of. And, though my health is mended, So wreck'd Are my nerves that I could not do one hour's Military Duty to Save my life.

The Article [issue] of shedding human blood, in me, is not a humor [whim] but a principle — not an evasion but a fact. It was received in early life, and has "Grown with my growth & Strengthen'd with my Strength" — not a partiality for British more than Savage blood, For, all circumstances considered, I think the latter more innocent than the former.

From the first Injuries done America by great Britain, my thots took fire on the Subject; And have been conceived & uttered, in one unvaried Strain, To the highest personage and down to the meanest enemy, without hesitation or reserve, So that I can challenge all mankind to impeach me to my country.

¹³ Otis Grant Hammond, *Tories of New Hampshire in the War of the Revolution* (New Hampshire Historical Society, 1917), pp. 39-40. That Russell was a member of the local Sandemanian church is reported by Charles Brewster (1802-1869), longtime editor of the *Portsmouth Journal*, in his weekly historical series "Rambles"; see SeacoastNH at seacoastnh.com/brewster/47.html.