

2e – Rebel With a Cause



The Religious Society of Friends, called Quakers, were among the first Whites to denounce slavery in the colonies. But even this religious group, known for its egalitarian principles, sometimes wavered in its commitment to the cause of abolition. Slavery may have been a blight on man's soul, but it was also a profitable economic reality.

In 1737, a renegade congregant named Benjamin Lay began an all-out assault on the practice of slavery and the Quaker establishment that allowed it to continue. He published a 278-page tract entitled *All Slave Keepers, that Keep the Innocent in Bondage*. In it, Lay condemned the Quaker civic and religious leadership of Pennsylvania, where he lived, for actions contrary to the tenets of the Society of Friends and to the dignity of life in general. Benjamin Franklin edited and printed *All Slave-Keepers* for Lay, but he did so anonymously; apart from its incendiary comments, publishing anti-slavery literature was illegal.

The Society leaders were furious. Slavery, though despicable, was good business. Furthermore, someone they viewed as a crazed upstart was questioning and disturbing the careful order of things. But Lay wasn't afraid of creating a disturbance to get people's attention. And he created many disturbances.

On one occasion, upon entering the Yearly Meeting of the Philadelphia Society of Friends, Lay threw off his cloak to reveal military regalia. In the stunned silence, he then produced a sword and stabbed through the Bible he was holding. Blood spurted from the Bible and splattered those Friends nearby who were already frozen in shock.

Standing before his Quaker brethren, Lay proclaimed, "Thus shall God shed the blood of those who have enslaved their fellow creatures!" The "blood" was actually berry juice which Lay had put in a sack and placed in the hollowed-out Bible. But whether blood or juice, the impact was what Lay was after.

On another occasion, Lay stood barefoot in the snow outside the meetinghouse. When Friends expressed concern -' that he was risking his health, Lay berated them for their hypocrisy: How could they offer him compassion yet ignore the more urgent needs of the ill-clad slaves who labored in their fields all winter? Another time, Lay "kid-napped" - and later returned - a child to show the boy's slaveholding parents what it felt like to have a loved one stolen away. Lay's abolitionist feelings were hardly unique; many Friends agreed with him in principle, although they didn't share his combative style. In 1758, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting granted authority to the monthly meetings to discipline any Friends who bought, sold or imported slaves into the colony. In response to [his, Lay commented, "I can now die in peace," which he did, early the following year.

In 1790, nearly three decades after Lay's death, the Society of Friends sent the first petition to Congress condemning slavery as a moral evil and calling for the emancipation of all slaves. The rest of the country, however, would take longer to reach enlightenment; that it eventually did is due in no small part to the tireless efforts of abolitionists like Benjamin Lay, an unquiet man who had the ferocious courage of his convictions. He was, in his own words, "[a] poor common Sailor and an illiterate Man" who did what he did as "a Genera! Service, by him that truly and sincerely desires the present and eternal Welfare and Happiness of all Mankind, all the World over, of all Colours, and Nations, as his own Soul."

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