

# EARLY DEBATES AND CONSIDERATIONS

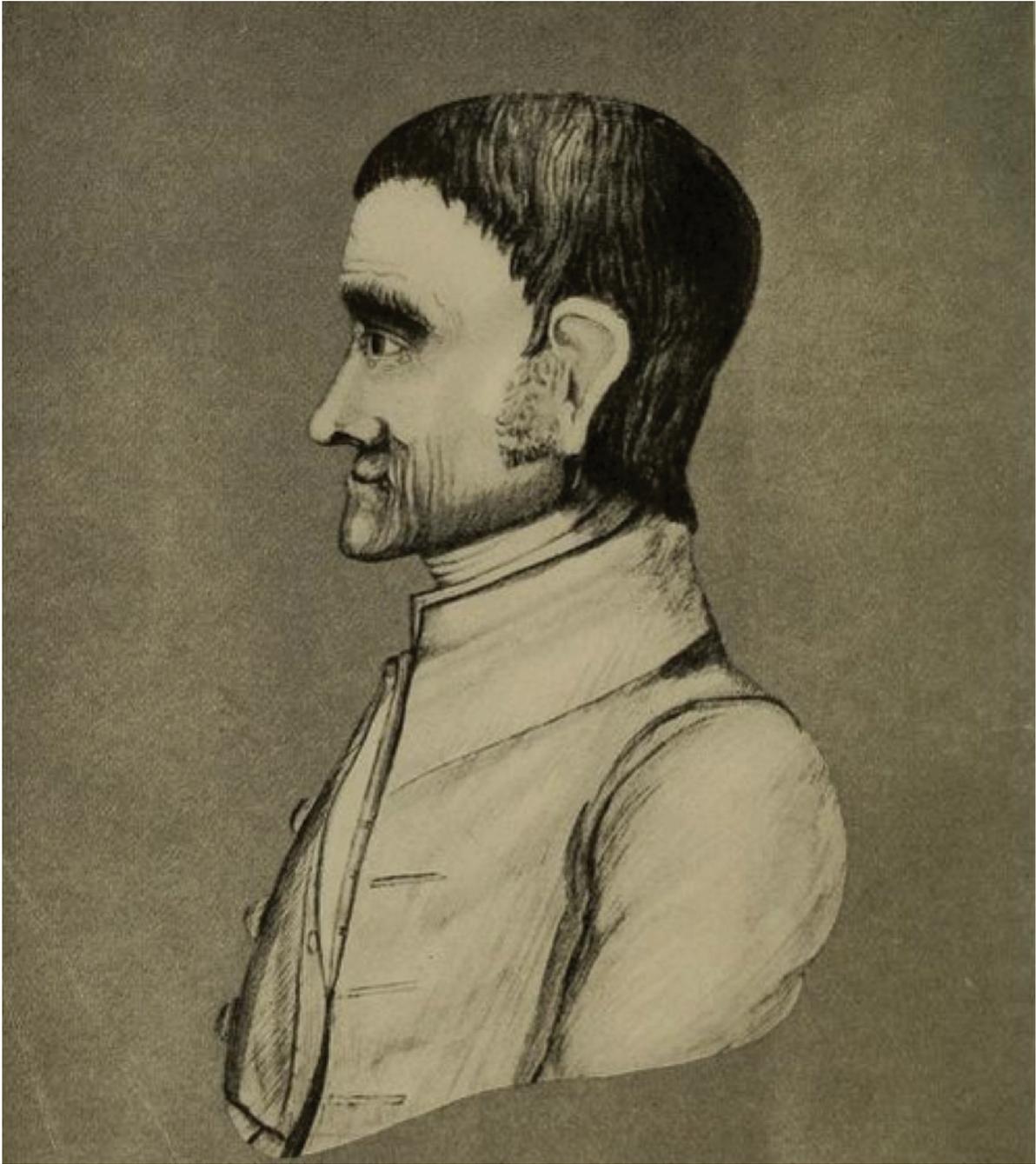
When in 1619 a Dutch warship carrying some twenty Africans landed at the Virginia Colony in British North America, a system of slavery was not yet operating there. Slavery had only recently arrived in the British West Indies to the south. It had been around in the old Spanish and Portuguese colonies for a hundred years by then, and of course had an even longer pedigree in the history of the ancient world. But when the first Africans arrived in Virginia in the early 1600s, they had in their favor the fact that neither British law nor custom supported the institution of slavery in the North American colonies. The arriving African men and women, therefore, were not enslaved in the usual sense but rather forced to work as indentured servants—a nearly equally odious way to live but one that at least held out the promise of release after they had paid off their “debt” to their masters. Some black servants, at least, managed to gain their freedom and even to acquire property in the colonial era, helping to create a small class of free blacks.

Custom and law, however, soon evolved to support slavery as a system. As early as the 1640s, some African Americans were bound to servitude for life, and their numbers only increased in later decades. In the 1650s, African servants were being sold for life, their bills of sale indicating that their offspring, too, would inherit slave status. By 1661 chattel slavery was legally recognized in Virginia, albeit indirectly: the House of Burgesses passed a law declaring that children followed the status of their mothers, thereby rendering the system of slavery self-perpetuating. In 1705, Virginia established a comprehensive slave code that completed the process by which most African Americans were reduced to the status of chattel. Slaves could not bear arms or own property, nor could they leave the plantation without written permission from the master. Capital punishment was provided

for murder and rape; lesser crimes were punished by maiming, whipping, or branding.

Elsewhere in the British colonies, a pattern similar to that of Virginia emerged. African slavery existed in both Maryland and the Carolinas early on. Georgia at first attempted to exclude slavery but, yielding to the protests of the colonists and the pressure of South Carolinians, lifted its prohibition in 1750. The Dutch brought slavery to the Middle Colonies (Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York) during the first half of the seventeenth century. With the advent of British rule in 1664, New York and New Jersey continued to permit it, whereas Pennsylvania and Delaware resisted it owing to the religious objections of the Quakers. Merchants in New England partook of the trade in slaves, and indentured servants and some slaves were present, but the codes surrounding slavery were less harsh than those of the Middle or Southern Colonies. Abolitionist sentiments in New England developed early and helped to fuel the great abolitionist movement of the 1800s. Free blacks there and elsewhere played a growing role in colonial society and in some cases led the charge against the institution of slavery.

In the years after the American Revolution, slavery continued to form the core of the agricultural system of labor in the South. The North, however, took a series of steps to abolish slavery between 1774 and 1804. During the Constitutional Convention of 1787, it had an ambiguous status among the delegates and was not, in the end, rejected by the Constitution. The Virginia planters who had played a major role in bringing American independence ensured that freedom did not extend to enslaved persons and that planters’ property rights (including ownership of slaves) took precedence over any notion of human rights for slaves.



*Portrait of John Woolman. Original sepia drawing is almost certainly the work of John Woolman's friend and contemporary, Robert Smith III, of Burlington, New Jersey. The Journal and Essays of John Woolman (1922)*

## ■ ***Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes***

**Date:** 1754

**Author:** John Woolman

**Genre:** Tract

### **Summary Overview**

*Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* remains one of the earliest and most influential antislavery tracts written in North America. Composed by the Quaker John Woolman in 1753, it gained approval by the Society of Friends in 1754, marking the beginnings of committed Quaker opposition to slaveholding. Prior to that point, Quakers in the American colonies had been ambivalent about the moral status of slavery, many even owning slaves themselves.

Writing at a time when prevailing colonial attitudes toward Africans presumed their inferiority, Woolman made a remarkably forward-looking case for racial equality. Not only did he argue that Africans belonged to the same human family as Europeans, Woolman even suggested that many of the perceived differences between blacks and whites were actually the product of patterns of discrimination over time—what modern scholars would call “socially constructed.”

Countering arguments that slavery exercised a positive, Christianizing effect, Woolman stressed its negative spiritual implications for both slaves and their owners. Slaves, he maintained, developed a series of negative behaviors precisely because they were forced to labor against their will. Meanwhile, both owners and their children developed evil habits that distanced them from Christ, forgetting the importance of humility, antimaterialism, and self-sacrifice. Of particular concern to Woolman were children who grew up accustomed to seeing tyranny as a natural part of dealing with others.

A not insignificant number of Quaker slave owners were so moved by Woolman’s thesis that they decided to manumit their human chattel. More than half a century later, Quakers inspired by Woolman’s work helped to form the American Colonization Society in 1817, dedicated to returning slaves to Africa. More radical abolitionists also drew inspiration from Woolman’s work and used it to fight for the complete eradication of slavery in the United States. More than two hundred years after its

publication, proponents of civil rights in the 1960s cited Woolman’s tract for its eloquent arguments against racial repression and in favor of racial equality.

### **Defining Moment**

John Woolman lived during a time of rapid demographic growth and remarkable political ferment. At the time of his birth in 1720, only half a million people lived in the colonies, a number that would surge to more than two million by the time of his death in 1772. Much of this population growth was due to immigration, with a third of Pennsylvania’s inhabitants being of (non-Quaker) German origin by 1800. As immigrants poured into the colonies, religious groups like the Quakers found themselves rapidly becoming a minority even in their own strongholds, places like Pennsylvania and western New Jersey. Yet precisely because they arrived first, Quakers remained a financial and political elite into the nineteenth century.

To preserve their power, Quakers required the labor of others. This presented a problem, given that many immigrants proved more interested in procuring their own land on Pennsylvania’s western frontier than in the traditional indentured servitude. The resulting labor shortage encouraged wealthy Quakers to purchase slaves. First shipped to Philadelphia in the 1680s, slaves became a relatively common sight in the Northern colonies during the eighteenth century. Although they were never as numerous as in the South, they made up roughly 10 percent of the populations of Philadelphia, New York, and New Jersey by 1770. Newport, Rhode Island, became a hub of slave trading in the eighteenth century, boasting a slave population upward of 20 percent by 1800.

While Quaker elites proved willing to accommodate slave owning, dissenting voices emerged within the Society of Friends. Long before John Woolman, for example, John Hepburn decried the ownership of slaves in his 1715 tract *The American Defense of the Golden Rule*.

Eighteen years later, Elihu Coleman penned another diatribe against slavery titled *A Testimony against That Anti-Christian Practice of Making Slaves of Men*. Yet neither Coleman nor Hepburn won the support of a majority of the Society of Friends, making Woolman's *Considerations* an important turning point in Quaker attitudes toward slavery generally in colonies.

Just as slavery engendered tensions within the Quaker community, so too did relations with Native Americans complicate Quaker colonial politics. For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Quakers advocated a peaceful approach to Indian-colonial relations. William Penn insisted on negotiating settlement rights with Native Americans, generally purchasing their land before allowing white settlers to move onto it. Perhaps the most memorable negotiations that Penn engaged in involved Delaware Chief Tammany, from whom Penn negotiated land purchases in 1682 and 1683. Penn's reputation for fair dealing became so well known that Indians often settled in Pennsylvania after being displaced from other colonies.

Despite Quaker efforts, two factors converged to complicate colonial Indian relations. One was the unending influx of European immigrants to the colonies, pushing the Western frontier ever farther onto Indian lands. The other was the growing tension and ultimately intermittent war between France and Britain, both of whom used Indian allies to advance their imperial interests. Such tensions began in 1689, when English forces and their Iroquois allies attacked French-controlled Montreal, only to be repulsed and counterattacked by French-Algonquin forces in New York, New Hampshire, and Maine. Although overt hostilities ended by treaty in 1697, they resurfaced in 1704, when French forces and their Algonquin allies again attacked English settlements, this time kidnapping women and children from frontier outposts in Massachusetts. Enraged, English military leaders ordered a counterstrike against a strategic French fortress at Port Royal in Acadia (modern-day Nova Scotia), eventually leading to British control over Newfoundland, Hudson's Bay, and Acadia. France challenged this control in 1740, leading to a protracted eight-year war along the frontier until British forces seized another strategic French fortress at Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island in 1745. Afraid that they might lose their foothold in the Ohio River valley, the French sent an armed force down the Ohio River, recruiting Indian allies to kill and expel a significant number of English-speaking settlers from the valley in 1752.

Violence on the Pennsylvania frontier led white settlers to challenge the traditional Quaker insistence on pacifism. Quaker faith in pacifism, such critics argued, was preventing colonial authorities in Philadelphia from raising the necessary military force to counter the Indian threat. Such critiques gained force in 1755, when Native Americans launched a devastating offensive against frontier communities on Pennsylvania's western border. Popular outrage over the death of white women and children at the hands of Indians confounded Pennsylvania Quakers, who had long pursued a strategy of accommodation with Native Americans, struggling to convert them to Christianity in a peaceful manner. Although such strategies enjoyed some success, the ensuing French and Indian War incited non-Quakers—by then a majority in Pennsylvania—to call for swift retribution. Quakers themselves split over the question of whether to accommodate violent reprisals or denounce them and effectively withdrew from colonial politics. Quaker pacifism was also challenged by the need to protect Quaker ships' crewmen from impressment by British naval vessels. The resulting rift marked a decline in Quaker hegemony in Pennsylvania, even as it proved to be the handmaiden of more radical Quaker politics, of which Woolman would become a prominent leader.

Yet Quakers as a whole proved reluctant to come out against slavery. Part of this was due to a larger colonial acceptance of legal restrictions on liberty; indentured servitude was common in Quaker colonies, for example, and Quakers resented British attempts to forgive indentures in exchange for joining the British army. Another factor was Quaker slave owning, a practice common not simply in southern colonies but among elites in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Rhode Island as well.

John Woolman was not alone among eighteenth-century Protestant leaders in calling for a return to fundamental principles. In fact, one might say that his decision to oppose slavery fell firmly within a religious resurgence that historians have since termed the First Great Awakening. Although it was transdenominational, the Awakening was sparked by the arrival from England of an evangelical Anglican named George Whitefield in 1738. Much as Woolman would later do, Whitefield toured different colonies, preaching fiery sermons designed to kindle spirituality in increasingly materialist hearts. In Pennsylvania, William and George Tennent, a father-and-son team, established a special Presbyterian school to train evangelical ministers, later inspiring the establishment of the College of New Jersey, or what would be-

come Princeton University, in 1746. At the center of the Tennents' preaching was a conviction that congregants should scrutinize the faith of their clergy. This eventually led to a schism within the Presbyterian Church between young reformers, or New Lights, who believed that the church should reaffirm basic Calvinist principles, and Old Lights, who had come to accept a less impassioned, arguably more compromised faith.

Almost every Protestant denomination underwent an awakening from the 1730s to the 1770s, as dynamic itinerant preachers traveled the colonies electrifying audiences. While most of the beneficiaries of this Awakening were already members of congregations, some colonies witnessed dramatic rises in church membership, particularly Methodists and Baptists in the American South. The most fervent proponents of religious reform tended to be the young and dispossessed, the very people who had not benefited from material gain during the first half of the eighteenth century. Frustration at the types of religious compromise endorsed by older, more established religious elites was widespread among many Great Awakeners, John Woolman included.

### Author Biography

Born to a prominent Quaker family in Northampton, New Jersey, in 1720, John Woolman began life as a farmer, shopkeeper, and tailor. Hardworking and frugal, Woolman succeeded financially at a young age, only to struggle with the inevitable interrelationship between commerce and force. Over a decade before the sharp decline of Quaker power at the hands of internal disagreements between pacifism and wealth, John Woolman recognized that war and commerce were inextricably linked, and he minimized his business activity to pursue the life of a traveling minister. Quaker ministers did most of their work outside the church, or meeting house, and spent much of their time conducting family visits or traveling between distant congregations aiding in intrafaith correspondence. Woolman's travels brought him into direct contact with the institution of slavery and with Quaker slave owners. This was true even of his first journey, which led him to slave markets in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in 1743. In 1746, Woolman traveled directly into the South, visiting Virginia and North Carolina. He later recalled, in his *Journal* feeling "uneasy" about fellow Quakers living "in ease on the hard labour of their slaves." In particular, Woolman lamented the "vices and corruptions" that slavery encouraged among whites. That Woolman was bothered by slavery was perhaps not surprising

for a Quaker who had already mitigated his commitment to commerce in order to remain true to his inner light. The doctrine of the inner light predisposed many Quakers to notions of social equality, on the ground that it was absurd that God would shine more brightly in some than others.

Aware of the tacit approval that Quakers had developed toward human bondage, Woolman initially engaged only in quiet protest, refusing to draft the wills of Quakers who wanted to bequeath slaves, rather than manumit them. Then, in 1753, he set down his treatise on the subject, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, which he published the following year. By 1756, Woolman dared to oppose not only slavery but also the payment of a war tax to defend white settlers against Indian attacks on the frontier. As Quaker political power in Pennsylvania crumbled, Woolman emerged as the leader of a radical new reformist bloc, freed from involvement in politics.

Three years after completing his *Considerations* Woolman ventured back to the South, finding conditions even more deplorable than he had before. Many of the slaves he observed were excruciatingly thin, with barely enough clothes to cover their bodies. Others suffered severe punishments or witnessed their children being sold off. One of the most disturbing aspects of his visit, however, was the indolence of white slave owners who, though they were Quaker, evinced behavior not in accord with the enterprising, hard-working ethos of their faith. Woolman found similarly disturbing conditions in New England, particularly in the port of Providence, Rhode Island, a heavily Quaker town with an equally heavy involvement in the slave trade. Shocked at the dire impact of slavery on both North and South, Woolman composed a sequel to his original essay, also titled *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, that went into greater depth regarding the negative impact that slavery had on Africans, particularly children, and whites.

Woolman's radicalism drove him to increasing solitude and arguably even eccentricity. In 1761 he stopped wearing dyed clothing because of slave involvement in dye making, leading many Quakers to wonder at his rejection of traditional garments. He also gave up the use of any other product tied to slavery, including molasses, rum, and sugar—all key products of the "triangular trade" among Africa, America, and Europe. Although peers deemed such actions unconventional, Woolman continued writing and traveling, producing texts against slavery, materialism, and greed. Noteworthy among these works

was his memoir, which described the details of his life and thought. Published posthumously in 1744 as *The Journal of John Woolman*, it quickly became accepted as

a classic of American literature. In 1772 he traveled to England, contracted smallpox, and died shortly thereafter, in York.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

*Forasmuch as ye did it to the least of these my Brethren, ye did it unto me*, Matt. xxv.40.

As Many Times there are different Motives to the same Actions; and one does that from a generous Heart, which another does for selfish Ends:—The like may be said in this Case.

There are various Circumstances amongst them that keep *Negroes*, and different Ways by which they fall under their Care; and, I doubt not, there are many well disposed Persons amongst them who desire rather to manage wisely and justly in this difficult Matter, than to make Gain of it.

But the general Disadvantage which these poor *Africans* lie under in an enlight'ned Christian Country, having often fill'd me with real Sadness, and been like undigested Matter on my Mind, I now think it my Duty, through Divine Aid, to offer some Thoughts thereon to the Consideration of others.

When we remember that all Nations are of one Blood, *Gen.* iii.20., that in this World we are but Sojourners, that we are subject to the like Afflictions and Infirmities of Body, the like Disorders and Frailties in Mind, the like Temptations, the same Death, and the same Judgment, and, that the Alwise Being is Judge and Lord over us all, it seems to raise an Idea of a general Brotherhood, and a Disposition easy to be touched with a Feeling of each others' Afflictions: But when we forget those Things, and look chiefly at our outward Circumstances, in this and some Ages past, constantly retaining in our Minds the Distinction betwixt us and them, with respect to our Knowledge and Improvement in Things divine, natural and artificial, our Breasts being apt to be filled with fond Notions of Superiority, there is Danger of erring in our Conduct toward them.

We allow them to be of the same Species with ourselves, the Odds is, we are in a higher Station, and enjoy greater Favours than they: And when it is thus, that our

heavenly Father endoweth some of his Children with distinguished Gifts, they are intended for good Ends; but if those thus gifted are thereby lifted up above their Brethren, not considering themselves as Debtors to the Weak, nor behaving themselves as faithful Stewards, none who judge impartially can suppose them free from Ingratitude.

When a People dwell under the liberal Distribution of Favours from Heaven, it behoves them carefully to inspect their Ways, and consider the Purposes for which those Favours were bestowed, lest, through Forgetfulness of God, and Misusing his Gifts, they incur his heavy Displeasure, whose Judgments are just and equal, who exalteth and humbleth to the Dust as he seeth meet.

It appears by Holy Record that Men under high Favours have been apt to err in their Opinions concerning others. Thus *Israel*, according to the Description of the Prophet, *Isai.* lxxv.5. when exceedingly corrupted and degenerated, yet remembered they were the chosen People of God and could say, *Stand by thyself, come not near me, for I am holier than thou*. That this was no chance Language, but their common Opinion of other People, more fully appears by considering the Circumstances which attended when God was beginning to fulfil his precious Promises concerning the Gathering of the *Gentiles*.

The Most High, in a Vision, undeceived *Peter*, first prepared his Heart to believe; and, at the House of *Cornelius*, shewed him of a Certainty that God was no Respector of Persons.

The Effusion of the Holy Ghost upon a People with whom they, the *Jewish* Christians, would not so much as eat, was strange to them: All they of the Circumcision were astonished to see it; and the Apostles and Brethren of *Judea* contended with *Peter* about it, till he, having rehearsed the whole Matter, and fully shewn that the Father's Love was unlimited, they are thereat struck with Admiration, and cry out; *Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted Repentance unto Life!*

The Opinion of peculiar Favours being confined

to them, was deeply rooted, or else the above Instance had been less strange to them, for these Reasons: *First*, They were generally acquainted with the Writings of the Prophets, by whom this Time was repeatedly spoken of, and pointed at. *Secondly*, Our Blessed Lord shortly before expressly said, *I have other Sheep, not of this Fold, them also must I bring*, &c. *Lastly*, His Words to them after his Resurrection, at the very Time of his Ascension, *Ye shall be Witnesses to me, not only in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, but to the uttermost Parts of the Earth*.

Those concurring Circumstances, one would think, might have raised a strong Expectation of seeing such a Time; yet, when it came, it proved Matter of Offence and Astonishment.

To consider Mankind otherwise than Brethren, to think Favours are peculiar to one Nation, and exclude others, plainly supposes a Darkness in the Understanding: For as God's Love is universal, so where the Mind is sufficiently influenced by it, it begets a Likeness of itself, and the Heart is enlarged towards all Men. Again, to conclude a People forward, perverse, and worse by Nature than others (who ungratefully receive Favours, and apply them to bad Ends) this will excite a Behaviour toward them unbecoming the Excellence of true Religion.

To prevent such Error, let us calmly consider their Circumstance; and, the better to do it, make their Case ours. Suppose, then, that our Ancestors and we had been exposed to constant Servitude in the more servile and inferior Employments of Life; that we had been destitute of the Help of Reading and good Company; that amongst ourselves we had had few wise and pious Instructors; that the Religious amongst our Superiors seldom took Notice of us; that while others, in Ease, have plentifully heap'd up the Fruit of our Labour, we had receiv'd barely enough to relieve Nature, and being wholly at the Command of others, had generally been treated as a contemptible, ignorant Part of Mankind: Should we, in that Case, be less abject than they now are? Again, If Oppression be so hard to bear, that a wise Man is made mad by it, *Ecccl. vii.7.* then a Series of those Things altering the Behaviour and Manners of a People, is what may reasonably be expected.

When our Property is taken contrary to our Mind, by Means appearing to us unjust, it is only through divine Influence, and the Enlargement of Heart from thence

proceeding, that we can love our reputed Oppressors: If the *Negroes* fall short in this, an uneasy, if not a disconsolate Disposition, will be awak'ned, and remain like Seeds in their Minds, producing Sloth and many other Habits appearing odious to us, with which being free Men, they, perhaps, had not been chargeable. These, and other Circumstances, rightly considered, will lessen that too great Disparity, which some make between us and them.

Integrity of Heart hath appeared in some of them; so that if we continue in the Word of Christ [previous to Discipleship, *John viii.31.*] and our Conduct towards them be seasoned with his Love, we may hope to see the good Effect of it: The which, in a good Degree, is the Case with some into whose Hands they have fallen: But that too many treat them otherwise, not seeming conscious of any Neglect, is, alas! too evident.

When *Self-love* presides in our Minds, our Opinions are bias'd in our own Favour; in this Condition, being concerned with a People so situated, that they have no Voice to plead their own Cause, there's Danger of using ourselves to an undisturbed Partiality, till, by long Custom, the Mind becomes reconciled with it, and the Judgment itself infected.

To humbly apply to God for Wisdom, that we may thereby be enabled to see Things as they are, and ought to be, is very needful; hereby the hidden Things of Darkness may be brought to light, and the Judgment made clear: We shall then consider Mankind as Brethren: Though different Degrees and a Variety of Qualifications and Abilities, one dependent on another, be admitted, yet high Thoughts will be laid aside, and all Men treated as becometh the Sons of one Father, agreeable to the Doctrine of Christ Jesus.

He hath laid down the best Criterion, by which Mankind ought to judge of their own Conduct, and others judge for them of theirs, one towards another, *viz. Whatsoever ye would that Men should do unto you, do ye even so to them.* I take it, that all Men by Nature, are equally entitled to the Equity of this Rule, and under the indispensable Obligations of it. One Man ought not to look upon another Man, or Society of Men, as so far beneath him, but that he should put himself in their Place, in all his Actions towards them, and bring all to this Test, *viz.* How should I approve of this Conduct, were I in their Circumstance and they in mine?

A. Arscot's *Considerations*, Part III. Fol. 107. This Doctrine being of a moral unchangeable Nature, hath been likewise inculcated in the former Dispensation; *If a Stranger sojourn with thee in your Land, ye shall not vex him; but the Stranger that dwelleth with you, shall be as One born amongst you, and thou shalt love him as thyself.* Lev. xix. 33, 34. Had these People come voluntarily and dwelt amongst us, to have called them Strangers would be proper; and their being brought by Force, with Regret, and a languishing Mind, may well raise Compassion in a Heart rightly disposed: But there is Nothing in such Treatment, which upon a wise and judicious Consideration, will any Ways lessen their Right of being treated as Strangers. If the Treatment which many of them meet with, be rightly examined and compared with those Precepts, *Thou shalt not vex him nor oppress him; he shall be as one born amongst you, and thou shalt love him as thyself,* Lev. xix. 33. *Deut.* xxvii. 19. there will appear an important Difference betwixt them.

It may be objected there is Cost of Purchase, and Risque of their Lives to them who possess 'em, and therefore needful that they make the best Use of their Time: In a Practice just and reasonable, such Objections may have Weight; but if the Work be wrong from the Beginning, there's little or no Force in them. If I purchase a Man who hath never forfeited his Liberty, the natural Right of Freedom is in him; and shall I keep him and his Posterity in Servitude and Ignorance? "How should I approve of this Conduct, were I in his Circumstances, and he in mine?" It may be thought, that to treat them as we would willingly be treated, our Gain by them would be inconsiderable: And it were, in divers Respects, better that there were none in our Country.

We may further consider, that they are now amongst us, and those of our Nation the Cause of their being here; that whatsoever Difficulty accrues thereon, we are justly chargeable with, and to bear all Inconveniencies attending it, with a serious and weighty Concern of Mind to do our Duty by them, is the best we can do. To seek a Remedy by continuing the Oppression, because we have Power to do it, and see others do it, will, I apprehend, not be doing as we would be done by.

How deeply soever Men are involved in the most exquisite Difficulties, Sincerity of Heart, and upright Walking before God, freely submitting to his Providence,

is the most sure Remedy: He only is able to relieve, not only Persons, but Nations, in their greatest Calamities.

David, in a great Strait, when the Sense of his past Error, and the full Expectation of an impending Calamity, as the Reward of it, were united to the aggravating his Distress, after some Deliberation, saith, *Let me fall now into the Hands of the Lord, for very great are his Mercies; let me not fall into the Hand of Man,* 1 Chron. xxi. 13.

To act continually with Integrity of Heart, above all narrow or selfish Motives, is a sure Token of our being Partakers of that Salvation which *God hath appointed for Walls and Bulwarks,* Isa. v.26 Rom. xv.8 and is, beyond all Contradiction, a more happy Situation than can ever be promised by the utmost Reach of Art and Power united, not proceeding from heavenly Wisdom.

A Supply to Nature's lawful Wants, joined with a peaceful, humble Mind, is the truest Happiness in this Life; and if here we arrive to this, and remain to walk in the Path of the Just, our Case will be truly happy: And though herein we may part with, or miss of some glaring Shews of Riches, and leave our Children little else but wise Instructions, a good Example, and the Knowledge of some honest Employment, these, with the Blessing of Providence, are sufficient for their Happiness, and are more likely to prove so, than laying up Treasures for them, which are often rather a Snare, than any real Benefit; especially to them, who, instead of being exampled to Temperance, are in all Things taught to prefer the getting of Riches, and to eye the temporal Distinctions they give, as the principal Business of this Life. These readily overlook the true Happiness of Man, as it results from the Enjoyment of all Things in the Fear of God, and, miserably substituting an inferior Good, dangerous in the Acquiring, and uncertain in the Fruition, they are subject to many Disappointments, and every Sweet carries its Sting.

It is the Conclusion of our blessed Lord and his Apostles, as appears by their Lives and Doctrines, that the highest Delights of Sense, or most pleasing Objects visible, ought ever to be accounted infinitely inferior to that real intellectual Happiness suited to Man in his primitive Innocence, and now to be found in true Renovation of Mind; and that the Comforts of our present Life, the Things most grateful to us, ought always to be receiv'd with Temperance, and never made the chief Objects of

our Desire, Hope, or Love: But that our whole Heart and Affections be principally looking to that *City which hath Foundations, whose Maker and Builder is God*. Did we so improve the Gifts bestowed on us, that our Children might have an Education suited to these Doctrines, and our Example to confirm it, we might rejoice in Hopes of their being Heirs of an Inheritance incorruptible.

This Inheritance, as Christians, we esteem the most valuable; and how then can we fail to desire it for our Children? O that we were consistent with ourselves, in pursuing Means necessary to obtain it!

It appears, by Experience, that where Children are educated in Fulness, Ease and Idleness, evil Habits are more prevalent, than in common amongst such who are prudently employed in the necessary Affairs of Life: And if Children are not only educated in the Way of so great Temptation, but have also the Opportunity of lording it over their Fellow Creatures, and being Masters of Men in their Childhood, how can we hope otherwise than that their tender Minds will be possessed with Thoughts too high for them? Which, by Continuance, gaining Strength, will prove, like a slow Current, gradually separating them from [or keeping from Acquaintance with] that Humility and Meekness in which alone lasting Happiness can be enjoyed.

Man is born to labour, and Experience abundantly sheweth, that it is for our Good: But where the Powerful lay the Burthen on the Inferior, without affording a Christian Education, and suitable Opportunity of improving the Mind, and a Treatment which we, in their Case, should approve, that themselves may live at Ease, and fare sumptuously, and lay up Riches for their Posterity, this seems to contradict the Design of Providence, and, I doubt, is sometimes the Effect of a perverted Mind: For while the Life of one is made grievous by the Rigour of another, it entails Misery on both.

Amongst the manifold Works of Providence, displayed in the different Ages of the World, these which follow [with many others] may afford Instruction.

Abraham was called of God to leave his Country and Kindred, to sojourn amongst Strangers: Through Famine, and Danger of Death, he was forced to flee from one Kingdom to another: He, at length, not only had Assurance of being the Father of many Nations, but became a mighty Prince, *Gen. xxiii.6.*

Remarkable was the Dealings of God with *Jacob* in a low Estate, the just Sense he retained of them after his Advancement, appears by his Words; *I am not worthy of the Least of all thy Mercies, Gen. xxxii.10 xlvi.15.*

The numerous Afflictions of *Joseph*, are very singular; the particular Providence of God therein, no less manifest: He, at length, became Governor of *Egypt*, and famous for Wisdom and Virtue.

The Series of Troubles *David* passed through, few amongst us are ignorant of; and yet he afterwards became as one of the great Men of the Earth. Some Evidences of the Divine Wisdom appears in those Things, in that such who are intended for high Stations, have first been very low and dejected, that Truth might be sealed on their Hearts, and that the Characters there imprinted by Bitterness and Adversity, might in after Years remain, suggesting compassionate Ideas, and, in their Prosperity, quicken their Regard to those in the like Condition: Which yet further appears in the Case of *Israel*: They were well acquainted with grievous Sufferings, a long and rigorous Servitude, then, through many notable Events, were made Chief amongst the Nations: To them we find a Repetition of Precepts to the Purpose above-aid: Though, for Ends agreeable to infinite Wisdom, they were chose as a peculiar People for a Time; yet the Most High acquaints them, that his Love is not confined, but extends to the Stranger; and, to excite their Compassion, reminds them of Times past, *Ye were Strangers in the Land of Egypt, Deut. x.19.* Again, *Thou shalt not oppress a Stranger, for ye know the Heart of a Stranger, seeing ye were Strangers in the Land of Egypt, Exod. xxiii.9.*

If we call to Mind our Beginning, some of us may find a Time, wherein our Fathers were under Afflictions, Reproaches, and manifold Sufferings.

Respecting our Progress in this Land, the Time is short since our Beginning was small and Number few, compared with the native Inhabitants. He that sleeps not by Day nor Night, hath watched over us, and kept us as the Apple of his Eye. His Almighty Arm hath been round about us, and saved us from Dangers.

The Wilderness and solitary Deserts in which our Fathers passed the Days of their Pilgrimage, are now turned into pleasant Fields; the Natives are gone from before us, and we established peaceably in the Possession of the Land, enjoying our civil and religious Liber-

ties; and, while many Parts of the World have groaned under the heavy Calamities of War, our Habitation remains quiet, and our Land fruitful.

When we trace back the Steps we have trodden, and see how the Lord hath opened a Way in the Wilderness for us, to the Wise it will easily appear, that all this was not done to be buried in Oblivion; but to prepare a People for more fruitful Returns, and the Remembrance thereof, ought to humble us in Prosperity, and excite in us a Christian Benevolence towards our Inferiors.

If we do not consider these Things aright, but, through a stupid Indolence, conceive Views of Interest, separate from the general Good of the great Brotherhood, and, in Pursuance thereof, treat our Inferiors with Rigour, to increase our Wealth, and gain Riches for our Children, what then shall we do, when God riseth up, and when he visiteth, what shall we Answer him? Did not he that made Us, make Them, and *Did not one Fashion us in the Womb?* Job. xxxi. 14, 15.

To our great Master we stand or fall, to judge or condemn as most suitable to his Wisdom and Authority; my Inclination is to persuade, and intreat, and simply give Hints of my Way of Thinking.

If the Christian Religion be considered, both respecting its Doctrines, and the happy Influence which it hath on the Minds and Manners of all real Christians, it looks reasonable to think, that the miraculous Manifestation thereof to the World, is a Kindness beyond Expression.

Are we the People thus favoured? Are we they whose Minds are opened, influenced, and govern'd by the Spirit of Christ, and thereby made Sons of God? Is it not a fair Conclusion, that we, like our heavenly Father, ought, in our Degree, to be active in the same great Cause, of the Eternal Happiness of, at least, our whole Families, and more, if thereto capacitated?

If we, by the Operation of the Spirit of Christ, become Heirs with him in the Kingdom of his Father, and are redeemed from the alluring counterfeit Joys of this World, and the Joy of Christ remain in us, to suppose that One remaining in this happy Condition, can for the Sake of earthly Riches, not only deprive his Fellow Creatures of the Sweetness of Freedom [which, rightly used, is one of the greatest temporal Blessings] but therewith neglect using proper Means, for their Acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures, and the Advantage of true Religion,

seems, at least, a Contradiction to Reason.

Whoever rightly advocates the Cause of some, thereby promotes the Good of all. The State of Mankind was harmonious in the Beginning, and tho' Sin hath introduced Discord, yet, through the wonderful Love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord, the Way is open for our Redemption, and Means appointed to restore us to primitive Harmony. That if one suffer, by the Unfaithfulness of another, the Mind, the most noble Part of him that occasions the Discord, is thereby alienated from its true and real Happiness.

Our Duty and Interest is inseparably united, and when we neglect or misuse our Talents, we necessarily depart from the heavenly Fellowship, and are in the Way to the greatest of Evils.

Therefore, to examine and prove ourselves, to find what Harmony the Power presiding in us bears with the Divine Nature, is a Duty not more incumbent and necessary, than it would be beneficial.

In Holy Writ the Divine Being saith of himself, *I am the Lord, which exercise Loving Kindness, Judgment and Righteousness in the Earth; for in these Things I delight, saith the Lord, Jer. ix. 24.* Again, speaking in the Way of Man, to shew his Compassion to *Israel*, whose Wickedness had occasioned a Calamity, and then being humbled under it, it is said, *His Soul was grieved for their Miseries, Judg. x. 16.* If we consider the Life of our Blessed Saviour when on Earth, as it is recorded by his Followers, we shall find, that one uniform Desire for the eternal, and temporal Good of Mankind, discovered itself in all his Actions.

If we observe Men, both Apostles and others, in many different Ages, who have really come to the Unity of the Spirit, and the Fellowship of the Saints, there still appears the like Disposition, and in them the Desire of the real Happiness of Mankind, has out-balanced the Desire of Ease, Liberty, and, many Times, Life itself.

If upon a true Search, we find that our Natures are so far renewed, that to exercise Righteousness and Loving Kindness [according to our Ability] towards all Men, without Respect of Persons, is easy to us, or is our Delight; if our Love be so orderly, and regular, that he who doth the Will of our Father, who is in Heaven, appears in our View, to be our nearest Relation, our Brother, and Sister and Mother; if this be our Case, there is a good Foundation to hope, that the Blessing of God will sweeten our

Treasures during our Stay in this Life, and our Memory be savory, when we are entered into Rest.

To conclude, 'Tis a Truth most certain, that a Life guided by Wisdom from above, agreeable with Justice, Equity, and Mercy, is throughout consistent and amiable, and truly beneficial to Society; the Serenity and Calmness of Mind in it, affords an unparallel'd Comfort in this Life, and the End of it is blessed.

And, no less true, that they, who in the Midst of high Favours, remain ungrateful, and under all the Advantages that a Christian can desire, are selfish, earthly, and sen-

sual, do miss the true Fountain of Happiness, and wander in a Maze of dark Anxiety, where all their Treasures are insufficient to quiet their Minds: Hence, from an insatiable Craving, they neglect doing Good with what they have acquired, and too often add Oppression to Vanity, that they may compass more.

*O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter End! Deut. xxxii.29.*

The End

## GLOSSARY

**Abraham:** in the Christian Old Testament, the founding patriarch of the Israelites

**Alwise:** all wise

**Apple of his Eye:** an image used in various biblical books, including *Deuteronomy*, *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, *Lamentations*, and *Zechariah*

**City which hath Foundation. ....:** quotation from the biblical book of *Hebrews 11:10*

**Cornelius:** a non-Jew whose house Peter and his companions entered to dine, the first time Peter had ever eaten with a Gentile

**divers:** diverse, various

**Gentiles:** non-Jews

**Holy Record:** the Bible

**Holy Writ:** the Bible

**meet:** fitting, appropriate

**Risque:** risk

**shews:** shows

**Then hath God also to the Gentiles. ....:** quotation from *Acts of the Apostles 11:18*

**they of the Circumcision:** Jews, traditionally known for circumcising male infants

**Whatever ye would that Men. ....:** the Golden Rule, from the *Gospel of Matthew 7:12*

**Ye shall be Witnesses to me. ....:** quotation from *Acts of the Apostles 1:8*

### Document Analysis

Written in 1754, Woolman's short treatise against slavery raised objections that were both strategic and forward-looking. He appealed to the self-interest of slave owners by documenting the negative impact that bondage had on whites, and he prefigured more contemporary debates about the socially constructed nature of race.

#### ***"The General Disadvantage Which These Poor Africans Lie Under"***

Following a scriptural invocation, Woolman begins his original *Considerations* (1754) by acknowledging that the conditions under which slaves live depended in large part on the particular circumstances and attitudes of their masters. Thus, it might be completely possible that some slaves were treated well, better even than freed people who could not claim an owner as protector. Nevertheless, even good treatment belied a deeper problem with the institution itself, namely that it placed the souls of slave owners in jeopardy. Equating slave owners to "Men under high Favours" (such as the Chosen People of Israel—the Jews), Woolman warns that such individuals are "apt to err in their Opinions concerning others." Indeed, he says, they are like the first "Jewish Christians," who would not "so much as eat," with their Gentile Christian brethren. Equating slaves with the Gentiles of New Testament times (that is, the earliest non-Jewish Christian converts), Woolman notes that, like blacks, Gentiles could also be physically distinguished from Jews, their lack of circumcision being analogous to the difference in skin color. Implicit in such a comparison is the notion that skin color is a superficial quality, not an indicator of genuine dissimilarity. Just as Gentile converts, despite their superficial differences, were genuine Christians, so black slaves must be considered our brothers today.

#### ***"Favours ... Peculiar to One Nation"***

Assuming something like the modern conception of race as a "socially constructed" category, Woolman claims that anyone who believes "Favours" are "peculiar to one Nation" suffers from a "Darkness in the Understanding." Inherent in that darkness is the misconception that blacks are congenitally inferior, when in fact societal circumstances could explain their plight. Examples of such circumstances included the fact that they had been forced into servitude, made to perform menial tasks, denied education, and robbed of any reward for their work. Such circumstances, in turn, quickly explained the development of other "odious" habits, including laziness, which

is actually the logical response for people forced into an occupation against their will. In a particularly eloquent passage, Woolman suggests that were Europeans treated like slaves, they too would come to adopt characteristics commonly attributed to Africans. "Suppose, then that our Ancestors and we had been exposed to constant Servitude ... [and] had generally been treated as a contemptible, ignorant Part of Mankind: Should we, in that Case, be less abject than they now are?"

Just as Woolman recognizes that structural factors could contribute to the appearance of inferiority, so too he observes that structural changes might have the opposite effect. If "our Conduct towards [African Americans] be seasoned with his [Christ's] Love," for example, then "sloth' and 'other Habits appearing odious to us' would disappear." Before that could happen, however, whites had to recognize that slavery falsely elevated Europeans above blacks, corrupting their perceptions of reality and truth.

#### ***"When Self-love Presides in Our Minds"***

Continuing with his emphasis on whites, Woolman equates slaveholding with pride, or "self-love," warning that its tendency was to lead the slave owner away from Christ. Specifically, slavery precluded slave owners from honoring Christ's command to treat all men "as becometh Sons of one Father" as well as the command in Leviticus 14:33–34 to love the stranger as oneself. Conceding that owners might be concerned about their investments in slaves as well as the threat that freed people of color might pose to public safety, Woolman invokes the notion that whites possess a collective responsibility for blacks, which necessitates risking death and financial ruin. Indeed, financial ruin is not necessarily a bad thing in Woolman's eyes, for worldly wealth itself represented a "snare" that only tempted slave owners with "the getting of riches," driving a wedge between themselves and the Gospels of Christ.

Children, in particular, warns Woolman, are threatened by the corrupting influences of slavery. Whereas those children who are "prudently employed in the necessary Affairs of Life" tend to benefit from hard work, children of slave owners experience an "Ease and Idleness" that invariably lead to "evil habits." Exacerbating this is the fact that children of slave owners grow used to "lording it over their Fellow Creatures," making the attainment of true humility and grace virtually impossible.

### **“This Seems to Contradict the Design of Providence”**

Placing Christ’s emphasis on humility, poverty, and selflessness at the heart of his considerations, Woolman concludes his somewhat rambling eighteen-page essay by making a compelling case that slavery is antithetical to “the Design of Providence.” Slave owners should not recoil from this revelation, argues Woolman, but instead take it as an opportunity to free their slaves and bring upon themselves hardships that would win God’s grace. They should draw inspiration from biblical figures such as Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and David, all of whom suffered and, in their suffering, won God’s favor.

Pitching his complaint against slavery as a desperate bid to save the souls of slave owners, Woolman emphasizes that all great figures in the Bible had suffered moments when they were “very low and dejected,” only to find that material loss translated invariably into spiritual gain. Conversely, those who did not recognize God’s will risked incurring God’s wrath, another possible fate of the slave owner who failed to see how slavery alienated him from the teachings of Jesus. Those whose ownership of slaves only made them more “selfish, earthly, and sensual” would “wander in a Maze of dark Anxiety.”

### **Essential Themes**

Evidence that Woolman succeeded emerged shortly after he presented his tract to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Rather than reject him, as they had prior opponents of slavery, Quaker leaders authorized his work for general publication to Quaker communities both in the American colonies and England, declaring it the official position of the Virginia Yearly Meeting in 1754. This marked a significant departure from past accommodations on the question of slavery and ushered in a new era of Quaker leadership in what would become the abolition movement. It might be said that Woolman transformed the decline of Quaker hegemony in Pennsylvania politics into a spiritual opportunity, successfully reinvigorating the spiritual life of the Society of Friends.

Woolman’s public denunciation of slavery came on the eve of catastrophe for Quaker America, providing a new vision for one of America’s great faiths. One year after the completion of his *Considerations*, Native Americans and their French allies mounted a vicious offensive against white settlers on the Pennsylvania frontier, even killing British Colonial Commander in Chief General Edward Braddock on the Monongahela River. One year later, France and England entered the Seven Years’ War, heightening tensions between the English colonists of

Pennsylvania and their Indian foes, many of whom allied themselves with France in the hope that an English defeat might enable them to regain their lands. Convinced of the need for a strong military, colonists endorsed a war tax to fund efforts against the French and their Indian allies.

John Woolman spoke out against the war tax, and his religious attack on slavery alienated him from more secular Quakers even as it helped him cobble together a new vision for colonial Quaker society, one made all the more important by the crumbling of Quaker dominance in Pennsylvania and western New Jersey as Quaker political elites were voted out of office by colonists desperate for military reinforcements on the frontier. Indeed, Woolman emerged from the “crisis of 1755”—the collapse of Quaker political power in Pennsylvania—a spiritual leader with a new vision for the Church. Much like other religious leaders of the Great Awakening, Woolman drove home the message that congregants needed to recommit themselves to their faith and return to first principles as a guide.

Woolman’s *Considerations* became an immediate inspiration to Quakers in the American colonies, prompting many to manumit their slaves. In fact, his leadership transformed American Quakerism into a vanguard of anti-slavery activism in the United States. Two years after his death in 1772, Quaker leadership made the selling or transferring of slaves grounds for excommunication, and in 1776 the leadership ordered all Quakers to free their human chattel. In 1780, Pennsylvania passed An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, and in 1790 the Society of Friends petitioned Congress requesting the abolition of slavery. By 1817 Quakers inspired by Woolman founded the American Colonization Society, calling for the manumission of slaves and their return to Africa. Later abolitionists borrowed from Woolman’s arguments to lobby for the eradication of slavery in the United States. Leading public intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson publicly praised Woolman’s work for its eloquent prose and sweeping ideas. The poet John Greenleaf Whittier took inspiration from him. Almost two hundred years after Woolman’s death, civil rights activists in the 1960s recovered his work and found inspiration in his proclamations of racial equality and spiritual denunciations of racial injustice. A radical at the time that he wrote, Woolman became a visionary model to later generations.

—Anders Walker, JD, PhD

**Additional Reading**

- Barbour, Hugh, and J. William Frost. *The Quakers*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.
- Cady, Edwin H. *John Woolman: The Mind of the Quaker Saint*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1965.
- Drake, Thomas E. *Quakers and Slavery in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950.
- Marietta, Jack D. *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748–1783*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984.
- Olmsted, Sterling, and Mike Heller, eds. *John Woolman: A Nonviolence and Social Change Source Book*. Wilmington, Ohio: Wilmington College Peace Resource Center, 1997.
- Shi, David E. *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Soderlund, Jean R. *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Whitney, Janet. *John Woolman: American Quaker*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942.
- Woolman, John. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. Ed. Phillips P. Moulton. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989.