

John Woolman

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John Woolman (October 19, 1720 – October 7, 1772) was an itinerant Quaker preacher, traveling throughout the American colonies, advocating against conscription, military taxation, and particularly slavery.

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Origins and early life

John Woolman came from a family of Friends (Quakers). His grandfather, also named John Woolman, was one of the early settlers of

New Jersey. His father Samuel Woolman was a farmer. Their estate was between Burlington and Mount Holly Township in that state.

John Woolman tells a story in his journal about a major turning point in his life. During his youth he happened upon a robin's nest with hatchlings in it. Woolman, as many young people would do, began throwing rocks at the mother robin just to see if he could hit her. He ended up killing the mother bird, but then remorse filled him as he thought of the baby birds who had no chance of surviving without her. He got the nest down from the tree and quickly killed the hatchlings — believing it to be the most merciful thing to do. This experience weighed on his heart, and inspired in him a love and protectiveness for all living things from then on.

At age 23 his employer asked him to write a bill of sale for a slave. He told his employer that he thought that slavekeeping was inconsistent with the Christian religion. Many Friends believed that slavery was bad — even

a sin — but there was not a universal condemnation of it among Friends. Some Friends bought slaves from other people in order to treat them humanely and educate them. Other Friends seemed to have no conviction against slavery whatsoever.

Ministry

Woolman took up a concern to minister to Friends and others in remote places. He went on his first ministry trip in 1746 with Isaac Andrews. They went about 1,500 miles round-trip in three months, going as far south as North Carolina. He preached on many topics, including slavery during this and other such trips.

In 1754 Woolman wrote *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*. He refused to draw up wills transferring slaves. Working on a nonconfrontational, personal level, he individually convinced many Quaker slaveholders to free their slaves. He attempted personally to avoid using the products of

slavery; for example, he wore undyed clothing because slaves were used in the making of dyes. Whenever he received hospitality from a slaveholder, he insisted on paying the slaves for their work in attending him.

Woolman worked within the Friends traditions of seeking the guidance of the Spirit of Christ and patiently waiting to achieve unity in the Spirit. He went from one Friends meeting to another and expressed his concern about slaveholding. One by one the various Meetings began to see the evils of slavery and wrote minutes condemning it.

In his lifetime, Woolman did not succeed in eradicating slavery even within the Society of Friends in colonial America; however, his personal efforts changed Quaker viewpoints. In 1790 the Society of Friends petitioned the United States Congress for the abolition of slavery. The fair treatment of people of all races is now part of the Friends Testimony of Equality.

Woolman was also committed to the Friends Testimony of Simplicity. When his business was booming he felt convicted that it was taking too much time and was distracting him from the more important matter of fulfilling the calling that God had given him to spread truth and light to other Friends and other people in general. He gave up his retail business and made a living as a tailor and an orchard tender.

Woolman also lived out the Friends Peace Testimony by protesting the French and Indian War. He went so far as to refuse paying taxes to support the war.[1]

Woolman showed unusual insight for the time, in that he lived and worked among the Indians, recognising that the Spirit moved among them also. He showed concern for the poor, for animals, and for the environment and is a precursor of several modern campaigns.

The *Journal of John Woolman* is considered

to be an important spiritual document, as shown by its inclusion in the Harvard Classics.

Final days

Woolman's final journey was to England in 1772. During the voyage he stayed in steerage and spent time with the crew rather than in the better accommodations of the other passengers. He attended the London Yearly Meeting, and the Friends there were persuaded to oppose slavery in their Epistle (letter sent to other Friends in other places). John Woolman went from London to York where he contracted smallpox and died. A memorial to him is located in Mount Holly, New Jersey on the site of one of his orchards.

Works by Woolman

- Essays
 - "Some Considerations on Keeping Negroes", 1753

- "Some Considerations on Keeping Negroes, Part Second", 1762
- "Considerations on Pure Wisdom and Human Policy, on Labor, on Schools, and on the Right Use of the Lord's Outward Gifts", 1768
- "Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind, and How it is to be Maintained", 1770
- Book
 - *The Journal of John Woolman*, published posthumously in 1774 by the press of Joseph Crukshank, a Philadelphia Quaker printer. Several subsequent editions are available, including the still respected Whittier edition of 1871. The modern standard scholarly edition is *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed., Phillips P. Moulton, Friends United Press, 1989.

Works About Woolman

- Cady, Edwin H. *John Woolman: The Mind of the Quaker Saint*. New York: Washington Square, 1966.
- Fager, Charles. *John Woolman and the Slave Girl*. Kimo, 1993.
- Gummere, Amelia Mott (1922), *The journal and essays of John Woolman*, New York: The Macmillan Company
- Heller, Mike, ed. *The Tendering Presence: Essays on John Woolman*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2003.
- Hynes, Judy (1997), *The Descendants of John and Elizabeth (Borton) Woolman*, Mount Holly, New Jersey: John Woolman Memorial Association
- Reynolds, Reginald, *The wisdom of John Woolman / with a selection from his writings as a guide to the seekers of today*, (1948)
- *Some Stories About John Woolman, 1720-1772*. Quaker Home Service, 1973, 1980.
- Swayne, Amelia. *John Woolman*. Friends General Conference Committee on Education, 1942.

External links

- The Journal of John Woolman, online text at Christian Classic Ethereal Library
- The Journal of John Woolman, online text at University of Virginia
- John Woolman, Quintessential Quaker, review with links at QuakerInfo.com
- A brief but thorough biography
- A school dedicated to following his lead

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