

Connecting the Dissenter Movement with the Virginia Declaration of Rights

“That religion ... can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion...”

-from the Virginia Declaration of Rights

Grade Level: 4th grade

National Standards:

- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environment
- Power, Authority, and Governance

Virginia State Standards of Learning:

The student will demonstrate knowledge of the role of Virginia in the establishment of the new American nation by identifying the ideas of George Mason and Thomas Jefferson as expressed in the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. [VS.6b]

Time required: 45 minutes or more

Overview:

In the early 1700s, the only legally accepted religion was the Church of England. The pioneers of counties west of the Tidewater, such as Hanover and Louisa, settled in to farm the land. People in the eastern areas of Tidewater found themselves living in more populated areas with traditional communities and established churches. Others, who ventured into the newer counties of Hanover and Louisa, found themselves living in the “wilderness”. Itinerant preachers moved into the newer areas and sparked a movement for the south—one filled with passion for natural rights and freedom of religion. What was started in New England by Reverend George Whitefield found its way into the southern colonies started by a young man named Samuel Davies. The movement, known as the Dissenter Movement which was part of the Great Awakening, paved the way for the fight for individual rights and the American Revolution.

Learning Objectives:

- To explain the struggle for freedom from state-sponsored religion using the story of Samuel Davies and the Hanover Dissenter Movement
- To describe how the movement was inspired by ideas concerning natural rights
- To identify natural rights as the foundation of religious freedom and political freedom
- To explain natural rights as a main idea in the Virginia Declaration of Rights

Materials needed:

- Copy of Virginia Declaration of Rights
- Copies of [The Dissenter Movement in Virginia Reading](#)
- Copies of [Understanding the Reading: The Dissenter Movement in Virginia Questions](#)
- Copies of [Colonial America Outline Map](#)
- OPTIONAL: copies of [George Whitefield Preaching Picture with Questions](#)

Learning Activities:

1. Introduction. Ask students to write down ten things that they value and find important. For example, students might list: friends, family, church, Nintendo DS, sports/dance/music, pets, and so on. Now have them circle the ones that are not purchased or paid for in any way: friends, family, church, and so on. Talk about how the things that they value without a price are called natural rights. All people have natural rights. As a class, define a natural right by asking the following questions: why are you allowed to have friends, family, church? When are you allowed to have these things? What defines the limits on having things such as having friends, family, and church? Together, write the definition of a natural right: one that people should “naturally” have and that a government should never take away.
2. Pass out a copy of the reading called “Connecting the Movement”. Students should answer the reading comprehension questions after reading. Discuss the answers before going to the next activity.
3. Pass out a copy of the Virginia Declaration of Rights. For classes ready for a challenge, pair students with a partner and instruct them to highlight those statements that refer to natural rights. Emphasize that they should highlight phrases that they understand the best and not to spend too much time on any one of the sections. Discuss student findings. For classes which need more direction, have students focus on Section 16 (below). Read this statement together and ask students to find the phrase that emphasizes the natural right of religion.

TEACHER NOTE: James Madison edited George Mason's draft of Section 16. The following is Mason's draft originally numbered section 14: That Religion, or the Duty which We owe to our Creator, and the Manner of discharging it, can be directed only by Reason & Conviction, not by Force or Violence, and therefore that all men shou'd enjoy the fullest Toleration in the Exercise of Religion, according to the Dictates of Conscience unpunished, & unrestrained by the Magistrate; unless under Colour of Religion, any Man disturb the Peace, the Happiness, or the Safety of Society: And that it is the mutual Duty of all to practise Christian Forbearance, Love, & Charity towards each other. Note that Madison replaced the idea that religion should have the “fullest Toleration” under law to religion based on the entitlement of free choice. Toleration, therefore, does not equate with the right of free exercise. Freedom of religion is achieved only when it is unconditionally defined and not merely as something that is acknowledged.

From the Virginia Declaration of Rights, Section 16: That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practise Christian forbearance, love, and charity toward each other.

4. Other activities if time permits:
 - a. Give students a plain piece of paper and have them write the following sentence at the top: The natural right I value most in the Virginia Declaration of Rights is _____ because _____. After completing the sentence, students should illustrate their thoughts and what this natural right means to them.
 - b. Samuel Davies was born in New Castle County, Delaware in 1723 and died in Princeton, New Jersey in 1761. Use these facts and information about Davies from the reading to write an obituary about Davies upon his death. Students who want more information about his life can visit this site: http://etcweb.princeton.edu/CampusWWW/Companion/davies_samuel.html
 - c. Provide a copy of a picture of George Whitefield preaching. Whitefield started the Dissenter Movement in New England. Samuel Davies started the movement in Virginia. Students should answer the questions about the picture.
 - d. Provide a copy of the Colonial America Outline Map. Have students locate and label places where each of the people in today's lesson had an impact. This should include: Samuel Davies—Polegreen Church in Hanover County, Virginia; George Whitefield—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; George Mason—Williamsburg, Virginia; James Madison—Richmond, Virginia; Thomas Jefferson—Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia. For students who are ready for a challenge, encourage them to research the significance of each of the above people and events regarding the developments of religious freedom.

Possible findings of why each location and/or person was important to religious freedom: Davies/Hanover—where religious freedom began in the southern colonies, Whitefield/Philadelphia—where he chose to give his first sermon in America, Mason/Williamsburg—where the Virginia Declaration of Rights was passed into law, Mason wrote the original draft; Madison/Richmond—where Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom was finally passed into law, Madison helped this statute finally become law which his friend Jefferson had written; Jefferson/Charlottesville—Jefferson was the first American to use the phrase “separation of church and state”.

Finally, students should answer the question: What are the similarities or differences of the people and their map locations from today's lesson? The above locations are scattered throughout the colonies yet each person was significant to the cause of religious freedom. What factors tied the above people and events together for one common cause?

5. Closure: Remind students that today they learned about the Dissenter Movement in Virginia and that Samuel Davies was the leader. They also learned about natural rights, what they are and how they are reflected in the Virginia Declaration of Rights. To close today's lesson, ask students to answer the following questions: What are natural rights? Why are they important? What role did Samuel Davies play in the fight for natural rights? What natural rights are found in the Virginia Declaration of Rights?