

Connecting Samuel Davies and the Hanover Dissenter Movement with the Declaration of Independence

“I am not fond, sir, of disseminating sedition and schism...”

--Reverend Samuel Davies to Commissary Thomas Dawson, ca. 1753

Grade Level: 11th—12th 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 events and issues of the Revolutionary Period by analyzing how the political ideas of Locke and those expressed in Common Sense helped shape the Declaration of Independence [VUS.4b]
- The student will demonstrate knowledge of the political philosophies that shaped the development of Virginia and the United States constitutional governments by analyzing the natural rights philosophies expressed in the Declaration of Independence [GOVT.2e]

Time required: One to two hours plus more for independent assignments

Overview: In 1747, Governor Gooch issued a proclamation against the itinerant preachers who invaded the Anglican colony of Virginia. Reverend Patrick Henry observed that these ministers came “to screw up the People to the greatest heights of religious Phrenzy, and then leave them in that wild state, for perhaps ten or twelve months, till another Enthusiast comes among them to repeat the same thing over again...”. Samuel Davies defends his actions by saying that he has “sincere zeal...to propagate the [universal] religion of Jesus in its life and power.” Davies further explains that he has noted “the vicious practices that glare upon me around, and which are utterly inconsistent with true religion in any denomination.” As a dissenter, Davies questions the “dismal” scene around him—one that exists at the hand of the Anglican Church. Furthermore, colonists were required to pay taxes that financed the Anglican Church and its ministers. Davies and others set the tone for the events that followed. Two milestone

events occurred in 1776: the Virginia Assembly abolished laws that required colonists to pay taxes in support of the Anglican Church and Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. This was a time period that defined individual rights as much as the right to religious freedom.

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 American Revolution was inspired by ideas concerning natural rights and political authority
- To identify natural rights as the foundation of both religious freedom and political freedom

Materials needed:

- Access to a computer or hard copies of the reading selections below:
 - Defending the Establishment: Letters from colonial Virginia regarding the Reverend Samuel Davies and the Dissenter Movement
http://www.historicpolegreen.org/resources/defending_the_establishment.php
 - Declaration of Independence
<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.htm>
 - Written Document Analysis Sheet from The National Archives
http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/written_document_analysis_worksheet.pdf

Learning Activities

1. Introduction. Present the proclamation issued by Governor William Gooch to the Colony of Virginia:

Whereas, it is represented to me that several Itinerant Preachers have lately Crept into the Colony and that the Suffering these Corrupters of our faith and true Religion do to propagate their Shocking Doctrines may be of mischievous consequences. I have, therefore, thought fit, by and with the Advice of his Majesty's Council, to issue this Proclamation strictly requiring all Magistrates and officers to discourage and prohibit, as far as they legally can, all Itinerant Preachers, whether New-Light Presbyterians, Moravians, or Methodists, from Teaching, Preaching or holding any meeting in this Colony. And that all Persons be enjoined to be aiding and assisting in that purpose.

Given under my Hand at Williamsburg this third day of April, 1747 and in the XXth year of his Majesty's Reign. William Gooch

Ask the students: How does Governor Gooch describe the itinerant preachers in Virginia? What does he propose in this proclamation? What rights are being restricted?

2. Instruct students to read the letters that follow on Defending the Establishment: http://www.historicpolegreen.org/resources/defending_the_establishment.php
Guide students to read the letters through in entirety the first time in order to have a sense of the tone and implications made in each letter. Next, divide the class into small groups. Each group (depending on how many groups) will analyze one or two letters in the collection. Students are to record findings on the Written Document Analysis Sheet.
3. Students present their findings from the analysis to the class.
4. Next, students examine the Declaration of Independence. In the same groups, students are to analyze the document using the Written Document Analysis Sheet. Once the analysis is complete, have students participate in a class discussion using the following questions:
 - a. According to the Declaration of Independence, what right do people have when a government becomes destructive regarding people's rights? What rights were in question when the proclamation by Governor Gooch was issued?
 - b. Jefferson clearly states the grievances of the colonists in the Declaration of Independence. On the board or other central location, list some of the major grievances the colonists had.
 - c. Look at the letters from the standpoint of a Virginia colonist. What grievances would you have if you lived in 1747 Virginia and wished to attend a non-Anglican church? Next to the grievances from the Declaration, list the grievances as a dissenter.
 - d. What connections can be made from the two lists? Do the dissenter grievances echo the grievances found in the Declaration? In what ways are the grievances different?
 - e. Conclude the discussion by asking: How are natural rights the foundation for religious and political freedom?
5. Closure. Consider the quote from the Reverend Samuel Davies: "I am not fond, sir, of disseminating sedition and schism...". Davies stated that his desire was not to divide the church and rebel. How did Davies' statement receive justification as our country openly engaged in a period of rebellion and division against Great Britain? Was rebellion and division necessary in order for Davies' statement to be true for all people in this country?
6. Suggestions for Independent Activities:
 - a. Put yourself in the shoes of one of the Virginia Dissenters. Write a Declaration of Dissent. State your purpose for dissenting, list grievances found to be true as a non-Anglican at the time, and what proposal you have for protecting and defending your rights. The dissenters were everyday people. They had professions, families, and were involved in their

community. Take a look at the biography of **Samuel Morris** for inspiration when writing the Declaration of Dissent. Names of others who founded meeting houses: also in Hanover County—David Rice and Stephen Leacy, Henrico County—Thomas Watkin, Louisa County—Joseph Shelton, Goochland County—Tucker Woodson, Caroline County—John Sutton Needwood. Look at this map of Virginia in 1770:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/petitions/repecomp.html>.

Print the map and label the above counties with the names of those who founded meeting houses. What does the location of these meeting houses tell you?

- b. Choose a country that has long-standing conflicts with the idea of religious freedom (such as China, North Korea, Vietnam, Saudia Arabia, Iran, Sudan, Burma, Eritrea). Research in order to find out what the governmental position is regarding religion and the rights of its people. Write a paper to reflect your findings. Challenge yourself to include the following: What does it mean to be a dissenter in such a country? What happens to dissenters that country? What would it take to have religious freedom in the country you chose? Can you ever foresee a time when religious freedom will be possible in that country? What, if anything, can the dissenters of that country learn from the dissenters who lived during the time of Samuel Davies?