

Benjamin Lay

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Benjamin Lay (1681-1759) was a British Friend from Colchester who became passionately interested in slavery after a journey to Barbados. He carried forth his witness to his concern chiefly in the American colonies until he was [formally disowned](#) by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1738, claiming that he had never truly been a Friend and that he had obtained a traveling minute from Colchester under irregular circumstances.

All Slave-Keepers That keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates...

Chief among Lay's offenses was the publication of his lengthy book "All Slave-Keepers That keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates..." in 1737 by Benjamin Franklin, Lay's close personal friend. The book made many accusations against individual Friends and the Society as a whole for being complicit in the slave system that angered many prominent Quaker institutions. More serious, however, was the fact that Lay published his book without first getting the approval of the Overseers of the Press who evaluated all writings by Friends before publication (the Overseers would almost certainly have not approved of publication of the volume). Publically voicing an opinion and presenting it as evolving from Quaker principals without first gaining approval of Quaker institutions, as well as publically illustrating disunity in the community by criticizing other Friends were both serious offenses during Lay's time. The publication of Lay's book prompted Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to take out advertisements in various newspapers publically distancing themselves from Lay's book and his views.

Lay showed a propensity for theatrical demonstrations illustrating the evils of slavery and Friends' complicity with it. The most famous incident occurred in Burlington in 1738 when Lay entered Meeting for Worship clothed as a soldier with a sword. He gave a long message detailing the evils of slavery, and at the climax of his ministry, pierced his Bible with his sword. Concealed in his Bible was a bladder filled with red juice that splattered onto Friends sitting near him, symbolizing the blood on Quakers' hands for not standing firm against slavery. This display proved too much for Quakers to bear and he was formally, and publically, disowned from the Society not long thereafter.

Lay's tactics are in stark contrast to those undertaken by other Quaker anti-slavery advocates of the 18th century, most prominently John Woolman. Woolman was exceedingly careful that he never publically or spitefully criticizes other Friends, although he did not shy away from making witnesses that were difficult for Friends to understand, such as his decision to wear undyed cloth. Additionally, all of Woolman's published writings went through proper Quaker editorial review.

Included in the online collections of Benjamin Lay is his 1737 "All Slave-Keepers That keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates..." Additionally there are minutes of Philadelphia Yearly

Meeting distancing itself from Lay's book and formally disowning Lay. There are also several biographical sketches of Lay composed in the 19th century.

For further information see Lay's entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as well as Drake, Thomas E. Quakers and Slavery in America. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950, pp. 43-47.